

A Damsel for the Daring Duke

AMAZON BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BRIDGET BARTON

A Damsel for the Daring Duke

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

BRIDGET BARTON

Copyright © 2018 by Bridget Barton

All Rights Reserved.

This book may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form without the written permission of the publisher.

In no way is it legal to reproduce, duplicate, or transmit any part of this document in either electronic means or in printed format. Recording of this publication is strictly prohibited and any storage of this document is not allowed unless with written permission from the publisher.

[Facebook: Bridget Barton](#)

Table of Contents

[Free Exclusive Gift](#)

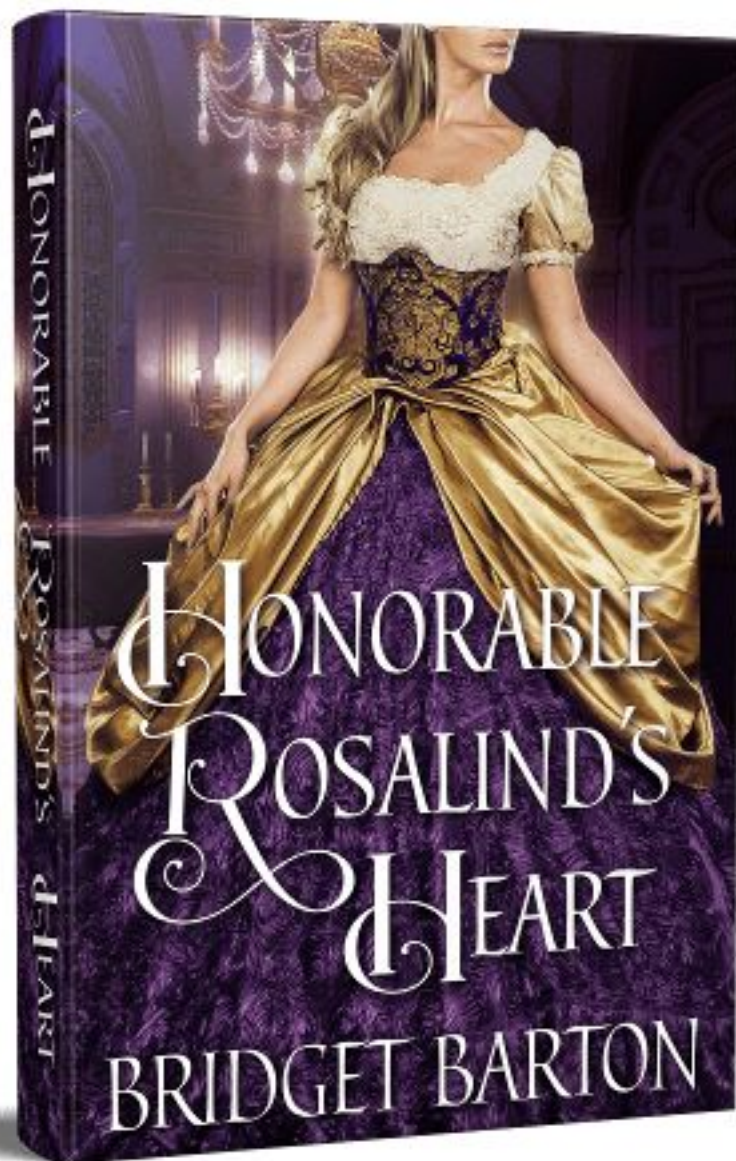
[A Damsel for the Daring Duke](#)

Free Exclusive Gift

Sign up for my mailing list to be notified of hot new releases and get my latest **Full-Length Novel “Honorable Rosalind’s Heart”** (available only to my subscribers) for **FREE!**

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://bridgetbarton.com/rosalind>



A Damsel for the Daring Duke

Introduction

When Lord Thomas Carlton, second son of the Duke of Shawcross, decides one fateful afternoon in his youth to befriend the beautiful Lady Catherine Ambrose, he could never conceive of the events that would follow. Tired of his father's bullying and arrogance, he thinks he will amuse himself by making a friend of the daughter of the Duke's bitterest enemy; The Earl of Barford. Little did he know how he would fall in love with Lady Catherine and let loose a chain of events that could seemingly be stopped by nothing and nobody.

Lady Catherine Ambrose, daughter of the Earl of Barford, knew what it was to grow up in a household where little was thought of a young woman. Her father was more concerned with his bitter feud with the Duke of Shawcross than the welfare of his offspring. When Thomas Carlton first speaks with her at a summer ball, Catherine thinks him daring and amusing, not to mention handsome. But, within a short space of time, she finds herself hopelessly in love with him. A love that would never, ever fade.

When the two are discovered and parted by their families, Catherine finds herself adrift in a world she does not know, a place so far from home. But will she find peace there? And can her new family help her through the most shocking event of her life? And, when all is settled,

can the two young lovers finally make their way back to each other
and live in the love that should have been theirs all along?

Chapter 1

“No, James, you most certainly did not mention it before today. In fact, I would go as far as to say *that* would have been your intention, rather than a simple oversight.” The Duke of Sandford’s keen blue eyes peered over at his son from the other side of the breakfast table. “And I am by no means the fool you seem to take me for. One of these days, I daresay you will realize it. But until that time is upon us, I shall have to settle for reminding you.” He took a huge mouthful of bacon, for which his son was extraordinarily grateful.

For one thing, it meant his father would remain silent on the subject of his sporting excursion to the east of the county for a few moments and, for another, it meant he would have less of the slightly undercooked bacon to eat himself.

James Harrington was by no means a wasteful young man, but his father’s habit for ensuring everything provided was eaten would have worked a good deal better if *less* were provided in the first place. His father was a full-bellied man with time on his hands to make every meal last an eternity.

James, on the other hand, could not abide to sit three times a day in his father’s company as it was, much less drag the whole thing out because there was far too much food for two men to eat.

“And I shall remind you daily if this sort of thing continues.” The Duke started to speak again, and James winced as he was confronted with a mouthful of partially-chewed bacon. “Every day.” The Duke filled his mouth again.

“Father, I said it was an oversight, and an oversight it was. Although I am sure I mentioned my excursion some weeks back.” James always found it a little too easy to lie to his father; nobody else, just the Duke.

Perhaps nobody else in James’ sphere of society had the sort of character that made the occasional lie something far less of a sin and rather more of a necessity.

“Mmmph,” his father grunted as he continued to chew, his mouth mercifully closed this time.

“And in any case, I cannot see the need for all this high dudgeon. I am away for the weekend at Hanover Hall. What on earth can my absence matter?”

“James, I might well have arranged a dinner or something similar here. And it might well have been a dinner to which your own attendance was vital. Pivotal even.”

James groaned inwardly. What his father meant by that was obvious

to him. The Duke was talking of one of his tedious attempts to find a match for his son. A young lady who, in the Duke's eyes, would be absolutely suitable but who would undoubtedly, in James' own eyes, be anything but.

"Well, you have not arranged such a dinner that I am aware of, Father." James knew he was being a little obtuse but frankly did not care.

"No, I have not," the Duke conceded gruffly; his patience was being stretched.

"Then surely there is no issue of particular note. Likely there is nothing for us even to discuss, let alone to get cross about and interfere with the process of trying to digest the indigestible." He looked significantly at the unappetizing piece of bacon on the end of his own fork.

"Why must you always try to be so clever?" The Duke was no better than an angry bear before mid-afternoon on most days; just one little prod, and the volume of his voice rose by several decibels.

"Father?" James said with amusement as he popped the bacon into his mouth.

"You twist everything and make a jape of it all. Well, you are not

funny, and I am not at all amused by you. Your friend, Hector Hanover, might appreciate your witticisms, but then I daresay Eton and Oxford must have changed a good deal since I went if this is what passes as proper behaviour these days.” The Duke furiously stabbed a kidney, and for an awful moment, James thought his father was about to push the whole thing into his anger-tortured mouth.

Fortunately, the Duke dropped it down onto his plate and began to cut it.

“Father, I do not mean to have you in all this state before we have even finished our breakfast.” James’ attempt at an apology was certainly going to be a sarcastic one. “And I really did think I had mentioned the sporting event at Hanover Hall. I can only apologize for not being absolutely sure and admit myself to be greatly relieved not to have interfered with the plans you did not make.”

James looked truly apologetic and his father, initially looking as if he was sure he had been tied up in knots but was unsure how exactly, nodded his acceptance of the dubious apology.

“Well, I must admit I am a little surprised you are going at all. I thought you had more or less parted company with Hector Hanover.” The Duke had calmed down, and James resisted the opportunity to smirk.

“No, we are as friendly as ever we were. I daresay the little distance between Sandford and Hanover has something to do with it all. But I am bound to say that whenever we find ourselves in company, we are much as we ever were.”

“I have no doubt,” his father said disapprovingly. “As frivolous and irreverent as always.”

“I daresay,” James said, thinking it pointless to argue, especially since what his father had said was, on this occasion, largely true.

James had to admit that he was looking forward to a few days away. Not only to rid himself of the ever-present and always rather bullying tones of his father, but to see his old school friend.

Despite his father’s assumption, James and Hector really were as close as they had ever been. James missed his old friend a great deal and blamed his father’s constant demands for attention for it. He was forever arranging something truly dreadful in the social engagement arena or demanding that his son follow him all day every day so that he might learn the art of running a Duchy.

Of course, James, being very much sharper than his father, realized that the best way to run a Duchy was to let the overseer and managers do the jobs they were paid for. They were, after all, the professionals in such things.

James was not entirely without interest in the whole thing; it was just that he could see that once you knew the ins and outs, you knew them. That was enough to be able to say with confidence that your staff was doing a good job.

A person did not need, in his opinion, to practice the whole thing over and over again. Once you had the gist of it, there was no more sense in continually practicing than there was in consciously practicing how to breathe in and out.

You knew what to do; it took care of itself.

James knew that, at nine and twenty, it really was time he turned his attention to more in life than just amusement, but knowing it and implementing it were two different things.

He had always been of a bright, almost sunny disposition, very much like the mother who had departed this world far too soon.

He most certainly had nothing in common with his father and knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that his beautiful, intelligent mother had only married the old brute because her own father had brought so much pressure to bear.

“I am bound to say that I have never particularly considered you a

sportsman, James.” The Duke was back on the hobby horse of disapproval, his agitation at the idea of his son’s disappearance to Hanover Hall still clear. “So, I would say that such a social gathering would be of little or no benefit to you.”

“It is true I am not a dedicated sportsman,” James said with lofty amusement.

It was true that James derived none of the pleasure from hunting and fishing that he gathered he was supposed to. Killing something for the simple sake of killing it, or in competition, was not a pastime that James had ever taken to. If he was honest, it rather sickened him.

He was by no means a weak man, however, and was physically very fit and strong, with the height and build of a well-fed farm labourer. And he was an exceptional horseman who liked nothing better than to tackle the most impossible looking obstacles when he cantered across country.

“Although I am rather good at archery, as you know,” he went on in his own defence, “a very decisive shot, as it happens.”

“So are a lot of *women*,” his father snorted with victory as if there were no greater insult than to be compared unfavourably to a woman.

“Indeed,” James said heartily, determined not to let his father have his

own way. "If I remember rightly, Mama was a most exceptional archer." James saw his father bristle and knew he had made a very palpable hit, one he was truly proud of.

His mother had been a woman of many skills and passions, and archery was but one of them. And she far outstripped his father in anything which required a moment's thought, concentration, or contemplation of any kind.

Time and again the Duke of Sandford had tried to fire his arrows with more accuracy than his beautiful wife, and time and again he had failed.

In truth, James could not remember his mother conceding a single shot to the husband whose own fury and determination to win had made him over emotional and reckless, loosing arrows off in a way that always made the household staff look extremely nervous and determinedly vigilant.

And it was clear that, even after all these years, it was still a bone of contention with the arrogant old man.

"And I do like to ride out, of course. I like to go at a fair old lick on horseback," James went on.

"Yes, but you never concentrate upon the hunt," his father sneered.

“There is a very good reason for that, Father.”

“And that is?”

“I do not like the hunt.”

“What sort of full-blooded man does not like the hunt?”

“*This* full-blooded man.” James looked dolefully at the plate of cool, damp-looking bacon that seemed not to be diminishing for a moment. He leaned over the table and speared two slices with his fork; there was nothing else for it, he would either have to help or find himself still sitting at the breakfast table with his father as darkness fell.

“I hardly think a man who does not like to hunt can describe himself as full-blooded,” his father grumbled on.

“There are many ways in which a man can tackle life with gusto, Father. Laying waste to anything with fur or feathers is but one of them.” James realized that he had nothing in common with his father at all.

They were opposites in all things, even looks. Where the old Duke had always been fair, James was dark. He had dark, neatly cut thick hair, and his green eyes were just like his mother’s had been. But the old

Duke had always been pale, his fair hair boasting none of the thickness of his son's.

In fact, James' hair was so dark that the few greys he had stood out like fine silver, but his father's hair simply looked a faded version of what it had always been and was not at all grey.

And the Duke had always been and still was, something of a flabby man, one who always ran to fat no matter what he did. James, on the other hand, was taller and leaner, with no more than the simplest of activities keeping him fit and taut.

As for character, nobody could be forgiven for thinking that the two men came from different worlds, never mind the same family. The Duke was a bully who thought that everybody around him had been put there by the Lord God Almighty himself with no better purpose than to do his bidding.

He was feared by their staff and tradesmen alike, and there were few in society who did not agree with him on every opinion because it was unwise to do any other.

James was an entirely different sort of a man. He loved life and liked nothing better than to be greatly amused. He was, perhaps, not as serious as a young man with his inevitable responsibilities should have been, but everybody who was acquainted with him liked him.

Staff, friends, vague acquaintances; it was impossible not to like a young man who was so very handsome and obviously lighthearted.

“I suppose you are talking about *women*, James.” His father’s disapproval was growing. “And you needn’t smirk,” he went on. “It is time you settled yourself down to some proper course of action as far as the opposite sex are concerned. You cannot simply flit this way and that; you are nine and twenty years old, and time is wasting, slipping through your fingers like fine sand.”

“I hardly think I am in my dotage yet, Father.” James was light, but he knew his father had something of a point.

“It is time you fathered an heir.”

“Ought I not to find a wife first?”

“Do not be flippant with me, James.” The Duke took two large tomatoes, another kidney, and two slices of the dreadful, floppy bacon. James was astounded as always by his father’s gluttony. “The time has come for you to settle down. Now, when you get back from this few days of foolishness over at Hanover Hall, I want to sit down with you and review a list of suitable young woman I have devised with the help of Charles Holt.”

“Suitable for whom?” James said, and his tone became a little aggressive for the first time in their conversation.

He detested the idea of having a woman presented to him and resented further still the idea that he would be expected to marry her, whoever she was.

James would never be in the mood to accept such an obvious attack on his own liberty, his very freedom to choose for himself. The thought was sickening to him.

As far as James was concerned, his father and the ruthless old attorney, Charles Holt, could draft as many lists as they liked, for he would never choose a woman from them. Even if he liked one of the women, he would not have something so basic, so fundamental, dictated to him.

“Suitable for all,” his father said in a final tone of voice.

“Very well, I shall be ready to sit down and peruse your list as soon as I am returned from the east of the county,” James said with an inward stab of belligerence.

James would only marry a woman of his own choosing, and only when he was good and ready to marry. And, as far as James was concerned, he was not going to be good and ready anytime soon.

Chapter 2

“Is Papa settled in?” Charlotte Cunningham said when her maid, Ruth, bustled into the chamber.

“Yes, I’ve unpacked his things, and he is taking a few minutes’ rest before this evening’s little event. Or *obligation*, as he calls it.” Ruth laughed.

“He is a dear, but not always in the mood for society.” Charlotte laughed also. “But he will be better for a little nap, I daresay.”

“You have already unpacked.” Ruth looked at the open door which led to a small, square space in which a rail was set.

Charlotte, never one to sit idle, had hung the few garments she had brought with her whilst her maid attended her father, Lord Lucas Cunningham travelling, as always, without a valet of his own.

Her father was a pleasantly down-to-earth sort of a man who liked to manage for himself. And as far as appearances went, he was little bothered what his hosts thought of him for travelling without the sort of entourage that other men of title did as a means of further emphasizing their status. Lucas Cunningham just did not think in such convoluted circles; he was as he was.

Still, he was in the home of distant relatives this time, people who knew him well and fully expected him to leave the majority of his household staff at home.

Lawrence Hanover was a second cousin to Charlotte's father, or at least she thought he was. Either way, the men had been good friends, and Lord Cunningham had readily accepted the invitation of a few days of sport, an event being largely arranged by Lawrence Hanover's son, Hector.

Hector was a very pleasing, if rarely serious, man whom Charlotte had always liked. He was always amusing company and so lighthearted it was impossible to be in low spirits in his presence.

Whilst there were few sports that Charlotte was particularly interested in, she was a good horsewoman and had been promised a little archery. All in all, she was looking forward to the gathering very much indeed.

"Oh yes, Miss," Ruth said suddenly, clearly having just remembered something. "I have discovered the identity of the young man who stared at you so brazenly when we arrived." She looked triumphant.

"Goodness me, you do not waste any time, Ruth." Charlotte laughed and sat on the bed, patting hard upon the extraordinarily firm

mattress to indicate her maid should sit next to her.

Ruth sat down with a bump, and her eyes widened.

“You shall do well to have a good night’s sleep on this.” She laughed.

“It’s a little ... firm ... is it not?”

“Lawrence Hanover likes to invest in things which last.” Charlotte grimaced as she bounced a little. “There’s not a lot of give, is there?”

“My mattress in the visiting servants’ quarters is more comfortable.”

Ruth sat right next to her.

The two young women had been together for years. Ruth Clarkin had come to Thurlow Manor, her father’s estate when she was just eleven and Charlotte thirteen.

Her father had decided out of the blue that his daughter would have her own maid and gave the reason that she was to be cossetted a little for having no mother living.

Charlotte had been thrilled at first, thinking herself a little grand to enjoy such a consideration. But she soon forgot her little ideas of elevated status when the two of them got along better than sisters.

Ruth Clarkin was a fine young girl who had come to them from a local

family, and Charlotte, being at home and a little lonely much of the time, found herself turning to her new maid as a friend more than anything else.

And it was a relationship which had blossomed and gone from strength to strength ever since. Now that Charlotte was twenty and Ruth eighteen, they were closer than anyone knew.

Charlotte often mused that she had friends in society whom she always regarded simply as acquaintances because she knew in her heart what a real friend was. She counted herself blessed, thinking how hard it must be for other young ladies who do not enjoy such closeness.

“I might have to swap places with you then. This is more an instrument of torture than a bed.” Charlotte gave Ruth’s arm a light and playful pinch. “Anyway, who was this *Mr Brazen* you have already tracked down? I am keen to hear his name and see if I know it.” Charlotte’s eyes were wide with inquiry.

“He is Lord James Harrington,” Ruth said with a flourish, her eyebrows raised so high she looked a little startled.

“Lord James Harrington,” Charlotte repeated in a quiet voice, searching her mind for any reference. “No, I cannot place the name, although Harrington is familiar to me.”

“Well, it would be,” Ruth said, and it was clear she knew exactly who the young man was and was relishing her moment.

When they had drawn up more than an hour before, at the front of Hanover House, it was to find themselves a part of a rather grand melee. There were carriages all over the place and footmen racing about with bags and leather-bound travelling trunks.

Charlotte had peered out of the carriage window to secretly study some of the guests, looking for faces she recognized before getting out.

There were people she recognized by sight but had yet to be introduced to, and she was pleased about that. She liked to meet new people and thought it was always fun to have conversations with others who were trying to be impressive. It amused her in a harmless sort of a way.

And the sport going on for a few days would mean that there would be time for her to see the mask of impression slip from one or two of them if she was lucky.

“Have you finished with your secret observations my dear? Can I get out of this carriage yet? I want to straighten my old bones,” her father said, and Charlotte caught Ruth’s amused look.

“My Lord, we have been travelling only twenty minutes,” Ruth said brightly, and Charlotte’s father laughed.

Ruth had a way with Lord Cunningham and was always able to convince him out of any tendency towards ill humour.

“Quite so, my dear Ruth. You are always here to bring me back down to earth, are you not?” He let himself out of the carriage and stretched and straightened, just as promised.

The driver came around to help the ladies down, but Lord Cunningham released him so that he might deal with their luggage and helped Charlotte and Ruth down himself.

As soon as the ladies were out, Lord Cunningham wandered around to the back of the carriage to give the driver gentle instruction and advice that he truly did not need, but which he accepted with practiced grace.

Charlotte was about to make some humorous aside to Ruth when she suddenly became intensely aware that she was being studied herself.

She turned her head a little and found herself looking at a handsome man a few years her senior. He was exceptionally well groomed, with the neatest thick dark hair she had ever seen. He was very tall and built in a rather manly way, being broad and strong-looking.

Realizing that she had perceived his interest, Charlotte thought he would likely look away from her. However, he continued to stare in her direction and, after a moment or two, Charlotte found herself growing a little annoyed with his impertinence.

Ruth disappeared around the back of the carriage, and Charlotte could hear her deftly intervening in the conversation taking place there, seamlessly handling Lord Cunningham's misguided attempts at assistance.

Charlotte, standing alone, turned so that she was square on to the persistent man. She thought that such an obvious display of displeasure on her part might go some way to dissuading him from his current occupation.

However, it did not. He continued to stare at her, only now he was smiling. Charlotte felt her mouth drop open just a little; the nerve of the man to stand and stare at her like that when she had made it plain she had seen him!

Charlotte had the most curious feeling as the two of them stood staring at one another, neither of them ready to give in and look away. It was as if they were suddenly in a silent world of their own, with people dashing this way and that, activity going on all around them, but they were both still.

They remained almost as two points of reference; static hinges about which the rest of the world turned in its own bustling, noisy fashion. Yet still, their own silent and still world remained.

Charlotte, wanting to break the gaze, tipped her head a little to one side and raised her eyebrows at the man quizzically. She would have broken their stare herself, but she did not want to be the first to give in.

Something about it all had become a little competitive, and she had the sense of wanting this man to know he had already bitten off far more than he could chew in choosing to stare at her. Much better he stare at some other young lady; one who would blush and look away, only to peer back and see if the handsome man was still studying her.

Charlotte was most certainly not that sort of young lady, and she would have stamped on her own foot if her cheeks had dared to blush and let her down in such a way.

The man smiled wider still, and she felt a further stab of annoyance that it made him even more handsome. His skin was very tanned as if he spent much of his time out of doors, and his eyes were light, either green or blue, she could not quite tell from that distance.

His hair looked as if it was a little prematurely greying in parts, just

here and there, and predominately at the temples. She could not think he was older than thirty years, and perhaps he was not even that.

He wore a tan coloured tailcoat over a dark brown waistcoat and breeches, and it was a shade which suited him very well.

She could not help thinking that a man who was so well proportioned must be a true delight to his tailor, for surely it was a much simpler thing to make such well-fitting clothes for a well-favoured man.

It seemed to Charlotte that the more determined she became to hold his gaze and not look away, the more determined he became to do the same. She realized that, despite the fact that the man had started it all, she had taken her part very well and was likely now as guilty of such foolery as he was.

Charlotte became aware that Ruth had returned to her side, but her maid remained silent, and it was clear that she too had perceived the man's interest.

In the end, the man was forced to relent. Hector Hanover had clearly spotted him from a distance and was calling out to him in his customarily noisy fashion. The man, realizing he would have to concede victory, bowed deeply at Charlotte and smiled before turning to Hector and greeting him warmly.

“Well, I must say, what a brazen man,” Ruth whispered in her ear.

“How long has he studied you like that?”

“For some minutes,” Charlotte said and, with an effort she had not expected, finally tore her own gaze away from him. “But I did not blush, nor did I give in.”

“That’s good, Miss. You taught him a lesson,” Ruth said with admiration.

“I am not so sure. I cannot escape the feeling that one would have to go a very long way to teach a man like that a lesson of any kind. I can quite imagine he is impervious to most lessons.”

“Handsome, though,” Ruth added with a wicked chuckle.

“Yes, he is that, Ruth.” Charlotte bit her bottom lip in an attempt to shake herself out of the curious little spell she seemed to be under. “I shall take care not to find myself alone with him.” She laughed as Ruth sucked in her breath.

She had nearly, but not quite, forgotten about the little encounter as she had settled herself into the chamber allotted her by the Hanover family.

Now that Ruth had more details, however, Charlotte found herself

interested to discover exactly who her staring opponent was.

“So, tell me, why would the name Harrington be familiar to me? Do not leave me hanging,” Charlotte said when Ruth had maintained an amused silence for quite long enough.

“Well, as I said, he is Lord James Harrington,” Ruth began a little grandly. “Son of Richard Harrington, the Duke of Sandford, no less!” Ruth finished with a flourish.

“The Duke of Sandford. Yes, that is how I know the name Harrington,” Charlotte said.

“Are you not impressed, Miss? The man who studied you is the son of a Duke. A man who would be Duke one day.” Ruth was clearly excited.

“Oh dear, I would rather he was not,” Charlotte said, and Ruth gripped her hand.

“But why?”

“Because he will undoubtedly suffer from the sort of character which finds itself forever entitled. Men of such title, or who are one day to inherit such titles, are almost always the same. I find them rather tedious in their manners, and their over-confidence always grates

upon my nerves.”

“But this one studied you, Miss. Really studied you.”

“Yes, like a leaf under a microscope. Really, such scrutiny should only be used by scientists and botanists!” Charlotte said pettishly, and Ruth burst into noisy laughter.

“Oh, you do make me laugh,” she said, and her eyes shone with mirth. “Really, any other young lady in the county would be thrilled to be so looked upon by a handsome man who would one day be Duke.” Ruth caught her breath. “But not you. You are determined to pull him to pieces and decide his character before he has a chance to show it to you.”

“You may laugh, Ruth,” Charlotte said, laughing herself in what was always a contagious form of her maid’s high spirits. “But I think he already showed me enough of his character in that look of his.”

“But how?”

“By not looking away when I perceived his interest.”

“Then you wanted to beat him at his own game, and you are annoyed that he did not readily give in to you.” Ruth was so amused that Charlotte could hardly wait for her next encounter with the

impertinent Duke-in-waiting.

“Perhaps,” she said and grinned. “Let us see what else he has in his arsenal, shall we?”

“For his sake, I hope it is more than a hard stare,” Ruth said, and the two women began to laugh heartily.

Chapter 3

“I think I might prefer to be nearer the front of this lot, Charlotte.” Lucas Cunningham was clearly feeling much brighter and more sociable than he was the day before.

“By all means, Papa. But do leave me where I am, for I am not at all interested in the hunt. I only want to ride, and that is all.” Charlotte smiled in an attempt to relieve her father of whatever obligation he might feel to stay with her.

Things were always a little freer on such an excursion, and Charlotte did not mind at all for it would give her a little time to be in company and yet, at the same time, be alone if she wanted. She was a very good horsewoman and could easily dart away from the rest when their attention was drawn by the hunt.

“You will be quite alright?” her father said hopefully.

“Of course I shall be alright.” Charlotte laughed. “Papa, what on earth could there be to worry about? We are still on Hanover land, and I am surrounded by horses and riders on all sides. You are hardly leaving me alone.”

“Well, I should not like you to think I am abandoning you.” He smiled

at her, and the skin around his pale blue eyes crinkled pleasingly.

Lucas Cunningham was best described as grey. His hair, which was still thick, was every strand of it grey. His face, no longer smooth and tanned, appeared a little grey also. And his pale blue eyes seemed paler the older he grew.

All in all, it seemed to Charlotte as if her father had been rinsed out somehow, and all his colour had departed.

He was, however, still a very pleasant looking gentleman, with a ready smile and friendly ways. He was, perhaps, a little frustrating at times, and often his attempts to help were nothing but a hindrance, even if the attempt was kindly meant.

No doubt he would make his way to the front of things, and then, at the crucial moment when the quarry was in sight, he would unwittingly find himself in the way, disrupting proceedings without even trying.

But he was such a nice man that nobody ever seemed to mind. It was just Lord Lucas Cunningham trying to help as usual.

“I shall survive the insult, Papa.” She shook her head.

“That’s the spirit, dear,” he said with a bright smile before blundering

off towards the front, his horse bumping every other one he passed.

Charlotte watched him disappear in a flurry of *I'm sorry* and *do excuse me*, and she laughed quietly to herself. He was a sweet man, and she loved him dearly.

As she ambled along, enjoying the clear, bright blue sky and the cool, crisp air, she was glad for the ride out. The horse that Hector had allotted her was a fine one, and she was pleased that her distant cousin had not patronized her with a small and plodding horse. He knew her well enough and had seen her ride one too many times to think that a suitable option.

“You are not interested in the hunting, then?” a man’s voice said from just a little behind her.

Charlotte slowed her horse further still to allow the speaker to come alongside. She was not at all surprised to discover it was James Harrington, and she turned to look him squarely in the face.

“And there was I thinking that you could only communicate with your eyes, Sir,” Charlotte said with a smirk.

“Goodness me, you are acidic, are you not?”

“Well now, we have both issued our insults and must live with them.”

Charlotte laughed. "Since we did not have the opportunity of being formally introduced last night, perhaps we should do it ourselves as we ride." Charlotte went on, "I am Miss Charlotte Cunningham."

"Indeed you are," he said with amusement. "The daughter of Baron Cunningham."

"You have already made your enquiries." She knew he would have done but was surprised that he so freely admitted it.

Perhaps she even admired such upfront honesty just a little. And if she did not admire that, she could certainly admire his handsome features at closer quarters than she had yet seen them.

On the previous evening, Hector and his father had laid on a buffet, and his thirty or more guests had circulated and chattered amiably throughout.

Charlotte had known some of the guests and been introduced to a good many more, but the son of the Duke of Sandford had always been in conversation when she was not. And, whenever she was in conversation, he was not, and she became aware of him studying her again, although much more surreptitiously that time.

"Have you not made your own?" He was looking at her as squarely as she looked at him, and she was pleased to finally discover his eyes

were a fine and unusual shade of green.

“Of course, Lord Harrington,” she said and laughed. “Tell me, did you wait for my father to disappear before making yourself known this morning?”

“Of course.” He smiled at her most openly. It was a confident smile, but rather more pleasant than arrogant, and she thought she liked it very much. “I always think fathers are such a hindrance to free-flowing conversation.”

“You mean you should like to say things to me that you would not dare to say in front of my father?” She made a very good attempt at mock fear. “Goodness me, perhaps I am not safe here after all.”

“You are quite safe. Unless you find anything but the most staid and etiquette-ridden conversation a thing to fear.”

“Indeed, I do not.” She leaned forward to adjust the skirt of her riding habit, which had snagged a little between the two stirrups of her side saddle. She straightened up when done and was amused to see how he watched her every move. “So, since we are having such a frank and fatherless sort of a conversation, tell me why you stared at me so forcefully yesterday at the front of the hall.” She fixed him with a stare which he readily returned.

“Because you are very beautiful,” he said, and Charlotte realized she had asked for such bluntness.

His voice was cultured but had none of the overtly upper-class tones which seemed to currently pervade the fresh air. It was a deep voice, but he spoke softly, and the effect was rather wonderful as far as Charlotte was concerned.

Still, despite his well-fitting black riding coat and breeches and his immaculately trimmed thick dark hair, Charlotte was determined to keep her head. She stood firm in all she had said to Ruth the day before, even though both women had derived much amusement from it and treated her assertions lightly.

Although he did not seem to have that air of arrogance, Charlotte thought it very likely that he had the same sense of entitlement as any other man of his status.

He was doubtless wealthy, the Duchy of Sandford was large and renowned, and she assumed, although she had no proof, that he would have enjoyed every privilege and that privilege probably extended to having the company of whatever woman he chose.

She could hardly begin to imagine that a man who would one day be a Duke would ever find his society refused in any place and by anyone. Although she had enjoyed enough of her own privileges,

Charlotte found the idea of entertaining a man to whom nobody ever said no a little irksome.

How strange it all was; one moment she found him amusing, and the next, for nothing he had said or done, she found him irritating.

“You seem displeased by that, Miss Cunningham.” He spoke again when she remained silent. “Are you displeased because you are beautiful or displeased that I mentioned it? Or perhaps you are simply displeased that I honestly answered your very direct question.” He was smiling broadly at her, and Charlotte laughed in spite of herself.

“Perhaps you see displeasure where there is none, Lord Harrington. Perhaps you see silence as displeasure because you are not used to silence. Perhaps you fill every spare moment with sound.”

“Ah, you think me a noisy and vain sort of a man.”

“No, of course not.” She looked all around and realized they were several feet away from the nearest rider. “We are falling behind.”

“Do you mind very much? Would you rather be nearer the front?”

“No, I am not very interested.”

“I am not a hunter myself.”

“You have no skill, or you do not care for it?”

“Both,” he said and laughed. “But I think I have no skill *because* I do not care for it. I prefer to ride and loiter near the back having conversation.”

“I prefer the riding myself. So, I see we have at least one thing in common.” She could feel the ribbons of her riding bonnet sliding apart and wondered why it was her riding apparel had chosen that day, in particular, to let her down.

She drew her horse to a halt and started to rearrange her blue velvet bonnet. She was aware that Lord Harrington had stopped his horse also, and the two beasts were side by side.

As she took hold of the first ribbon, the second floated this way and that on the gentle breeze. With a sigh of annoyance, she made several grabs for it before Lord Harrington reached over and caught the ribbon.

Gently, he took the other one from her and silently tied the ribbon under her chin. She felt the warm skin of his hands graze her neck a little as he worked, and she was surprised by the little shiver of excitement something so simple could cause.

“Perhaps we might have more than one thing in common. Still, I suppose the discovery of such things depends on something else altogether,” He carried on, saying nothing of her bonnet or its errant ribbons.

He gently heeled his horse and set off again, and Charlotte did the same. She was grateful for the return to their conversation as a means to shake off the strange feeling of actually liking this man.

“And what would that depend upon?” she said after clearing her throat.

“You giving me a chance.” He turned his wonderfully amused and broad smile on her again.

The flecks of grey in his dark hair looked silvery in the sunlight, and since he was clearly no more than thirty, looked incredibly appealing.

There was something about the early greying that gave his appearance a little extra interest, and Charlotte thought it very attractive.

“What on earth would make you say such a thing?” She laughed. “Really, you sound as if I already wound you, and yet I have not struck any blows.”

“Conversational ones? Perhaps just a little. But no, Miss Cunningham.

It is something else altogether which leads me to suspect you have already decided to take against me.” His green eyes were full of amusement, and Charlotte had to admit to herself that she was enjoying this curious little conversation very much indeed.

“Enlighten me, please do,” she countered.

“You have an idea of me fixed in your mind, Miss Cunningham, and I can tell you exactly what that is.”

“I am all interest, Sir.”

“You have discovered that I am the son of the Duke of Sandford, and so you have assumed that I must be one of the tiresome sorts of men who thinks he may go wherever he chooses and say whatever he pleases.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes. And no doubt you think me an arrogant man who thinks he has every right in the world to stare at any young lady he chooses to stare at.”

“Do I? Well, you did stare, Lord Harrington. The truth of that cannot be ignored in this little theory of yours.”

“Is my theory boring you?” he said and performed a very adept seated bow in her direction.

“Not in the slightest. In fact, I find myself very entertained by it. Please do continue.”

“Thank you,” he said and bowed again. “It is true that I did stare at you for longer than I ought to have done. But that was not arrogance, Miss Cunningham. I did not look your way because I thought I had every right to.” He paused for a moment. “But because I was taken off guard by you. When you stepped down out of your carriage, I was drawn to you for a moment and, I freely admit, took the opportunity to gaze at you. But I did think myself unobserved. Initially.”

“Initially. Yes.” She raised her eyebrows at him and silently demanded he continue.

“And then you looked back at me. I ought to have smiled apologetically and looked away, but I am bound to say that I do not go in for every point of etiquette and manners on the market. Which is not to say that I am a savage, Miss Cunningham, simply that I find that by following it all to the letter, all the warmth, amusement, and spontaneity is drained out of life, and the whole business of living seems awfully long-winded.” He looked at her like a young boy who had just got his clothes dirty but was hoping to win his governess over with a fast explanation and a ready smile.

“I have no doubt!” She laughed a little more heartily than she might ordinarily have done.

Well, if he could pick and choose the finer points of etiquette and appearances, then so could she. What was sauce for the goose was most certainly sauce for the gander.

“But before I had the opportunity to modify my own poor behaviour, I found you staring at me with such intensity I could not possibly have looked away if my life depended upon it.”

“Could you not?” Charlotte had never been more amused.

“No, good lady, I could not. You see, you made the whole thing a competition of sorts. It was clear to me that it was far more important that you be the victor than you actually make a subtle admonishment of my own staring.”

“I cannot begin to see how you have come to this conclusion,” she lied.

“Yes, you can.” He laughed loudly. “Miss Cunningham, you do not hold all the high ground, whatever you may think. You might have chosen to view me as a man of arrogance and privilege, for I daresay it is easier.”

“Easier than what?”

“Firstly, easier than admitting you threw down a gauntlet with your hard stare and, secondly, easier than actually getting to know me better.”

“Surely the throwing down of a gauntlet goes a good way to increasing one’s knowledge of another? After all, one must know one’s opponent.” She looked into his green eyes and was pleased to see the excitement in them. “So perhaps you might get your wish in the end.”

“I can only hope so,” he said and stared ahead to where the other riders were changing direction.

As Charlotte rode along at his side, she truly hoped that her initial assessment of the character of James Harrington would be proved very, very wrong.

Chapter 4

“Is your father not expecting you back at Sandford today?” Hector Hanover said as the two men enjoyed a very late breakfast in one another’s company.

“Oh yes,” James replied languidly as he took another piece of the perfectly crisp, well-cooked bacon. “Do you know, my father has the cook barely warm the bacon at Sandford. Really, I struggle to eat the stuff. It seems like a different food altogether here at Hanover Hall.”

“Yes, I remember breakfast at your father’s table, my dear fellow,” Hector said and winced in a way that amused James greatly. “But tell me, are you to stay on with me today?”

“Yes, if you do not mind it.” James chewed thoughtfully.

“Of course I do not mind. I am always pleased to have you here, and we shall at least be able to talk a little easier now that the other guests have departed.” He smiled happily. “But you know me, my dear fellow, and I do like to know the circumstances of everything. So tell me, why are you lurking here when your father expects you back?”

“I am lurking here, my dear Hector *because* my father expects me back.” James laughed.

“I had a feeling you might say that.” Hector was further amused. “Will you never tire of vexing the Duke? Really, he must be furious with you at times.”

“He is almost always furious with me. It is such a perpetual attitude with him that it has actually become his state of being. *The Duke of Sandford is furious, and he intends to remain that way, whatever happens,*” James said, and the two men roared with laughter.

James and Hector had gravitated towards one another within days of them arriving at Eton. They were both thirteen and both nervous, although each had very obvious humour which they used as a means of getting them through the most trying times in the early part of their public-school education.

Other boys liked them very much and, whenever together, they had everybody laughing, even the older boys whose stronger instincts were ordinarily to bully the younger ones.

The humour had never ceased between them as they had matured into men and, nearly seventeen years later, they were still able to make one another laugh.

“So, let me guess,” Hector said as he leaned back in his chair and took a long drink of his tea. “The Duke is once again reminding you of your

responsibility to marry a suitable would-be Duchess and sire a suitable would-be Duke. Am I right?”

“You are. Of course, since that is what he continually reminds me of, then you could hardly have failed to be right on this occasion.”

James liked Hanover Hall very much and was pleased to have a little time with his old friend without the encumbrance of polite conversation with a myriad of other guests.

The breakfast room was well situated and, being on the same wing and orientation as the morning room, it enjoyed bright sunshine whenever there was any to be had.

The room was light and bright and, although it had not changed since James had first been there as a boy in the school holidays, it did not seem out of date. The lemon-yellow walls were fresh, and the wooden panelling as white as he always remembered it.

The large vase of spring flowers on the sideboard was an obvious touch of the housekeeper, Mrs Merton, who had been trying to surreptitiously provide a civilizing influence on Hector and his father since Hector’s mother had died so many years before.

That was just another similarity between the two of them as much younger men. Hector had lost his mother shortly before arriving at

Eton, a loss which he managed and covered very well indeed.

And so when James lost his own, beloved mother at eighteen, Hector had provided the sort of support that only comes from personal experience. It was a quiet support without overt fuss of any kind, and it was something that James would never forget as long as he lived.

“So, amuse me,” Hector went on. “Who does the old Duke have lined up for you now?”

“It is not one, Hector, but many. As his exasperation with me grows, so, I am afraid, does his list.”

“He has a list?”

“You have met my father, Hector. Of course, he has a list.” James laughed, although he felt a dull feeling in the pit of his stomach when he remembered he had brightly promised to sit down with his father and go through the list that he and Charles Holt had prepared as soon as he returned home.

Perhaps that was a large part of why he was hovering at Hanover Hall. Although he knew he had other reasons too. Well, just one reason.

“There must be some front-runners. Do not leave me in suspense, let

me have some names.”

“Hector, you are a little too amused at my expense for my liking,” James complained.

“I know,” Hector said and helped himself to a hard-boiled egg. “But carry on.”

“Well, at the very top of the list is Lady Felicia Trent, daughter of the Earl of Whittingham,” James began.

“I have seen her,” Hector said. “At some event or other over on your side of the county. Anyway, I am bound to say she is awfully pretty.”

“Indeed,” James said without conviction. “But she has such a tiresome character. She perpetually corrects people, in their speech or on some matter of a misgiven date. Anything! She will correct and correct, and it is an attitude which leads me to continually call her Felicity instead of Felicia.”

“But why?”

“Just to see if she ever grows tired of correcting people in that quiet, needle-nosed way of hers,” James said with disapproval.

“And does she?” Hector said and paused expectantly, his fork halted

halfway to his mouth.

“No,” James said dryly, and Hector boomed with laughter.

“Oh dear. So, who is next on the list?”

“I believe it is Lady Penelope Colchester, daughter of the Earl of Paynton.”

“I do not know her.”

“Then count yourself lucky.”

“As bad as that? Why? Is she, too, a serial corrector?”

“No, she barely speaks at all. She just nods and smiles at everything I say, so I am compelled now to make the most absurd utterances just to see if she will agree with every silly thing I give voice to.”

“And does she?”

“Yes.” James’ response was as flat as before, and Hector was just as amused.

“My dear fellow, it seems that it is all rather a case of personalities. I am bound to say that you have become the sort of man who values a

little character and wit over the more obvious charms a young lady might possess. Well now, who would have thought it?"

"I am not so shallow as you would paint me, Hector." James laughed.

"I know, I am teasing." Hector smiled amiably. "So, why not simply tell me who it is that you do like."

"There is likely nobody on my father's list that I like at all."

"I am not talking about your father's list."

"Oh?"

"Come along; I have seen you these last three days making your little advances upon my cousin. Well, my very distant cousin, but a relative nonetheless."

"Miss Cunningham?" James tried to sound innocent.

"Yes, Miss Cunningham." Hector laughed. "And I must tell you I am not fooled by the look of surprise. And Charlotte is likely too smart to be fooled by it either."

"Oh yes, I should say so." James smiled in fond memory.

“Ah, so you admit it then?”

“Of course I admit it. She is an angel sent to earth to torment me, and I am sunk,” James said with playful drama.

“She is very pretty, that much is true, but she has a little too much intelligence and is a little too forthright for the tastes of many,” Hector said. “Although I must say I have always found her tremendous fun. She is far less scheming than other young ladies, and she was always an adventurous sort of a child if I remember rightly.”

“So, your families are close?” James said with interest.

“Close enough. Her father, the Baron, is something of an old dear. He has a great capacity for blundering about that makes the whole thing seem like an art form.”

“Yes, he is something of a clumsy horseman, that much I have seen.” James laughed at the memory.

“But nobody minds because he is so very pleasant. He is a distant cousin of my father, and the two get along. I know Charlotte well enough, but not too well.”

“How so?”

“Well, she is a good bit younger than us, James. I think she is but twenty, so as a boy she was of little interest to me as a playmate of any kind. I was already a growing young man at Eton when she had reached the age young girls reach when you can play and not fear breaking them.”

“And now?”

“I like her,” Hector said firmly. “She is... how can I put this? Different.”

“Yes, I perceived as much myself.”

“For instance, I daresay she did not fawn over you or nearly expire with excitement when you made yourself known to her.”

“No, she most certainly did not.” James laughed.

“Because she is not a title hunter at all. And neither is her father. As I said, he is a decent sort of a man and one of that curious breed who values his daughter’s happiness over her benefit to him as a commodity to trade.”

“Good Lord! Imagine that!” James laughed loudly. “I like him better and better.”

“Well, she is a fortunate young woman for I imagine that dear old Lucas will allow her a free reign in the choosing of a husband.”

“If only I were so favourably blessed.” James laughed, but it was true to say that he felt the veracity of his words.

He was, of course, free to marry at will; as long as the lady was of a breeding acceptable to his father with a sizeable dowry to match.

“Although I daresay she will not be a lady who accepts the first proposal to come her way. She is a thoughtful sort of a woman, one who would consider things at length. And she is not easily fooled, and so I can only suggest that any declaration of love be an honest one.”

“Declaration of love?” James said with surprise. “You are jumping ahead some distance there, my old friend.”

“Perhaps not so great a distance as you think. I know you, James, and I can say I have never seen this look of admiration on your face before. Something about my young cousin has caught your imagination, I can see it. And I know her to be a very tricky sort of a character, and so I envisage a long and hard road ahead of you. But I have a feeling that it would be the sort of journey you would favour over the ordinary sort of courtship.” Hector laughed. “Yes, I would say that you were very well suited. Certainly, in terms of stubbornness and wit, at any rate.”

James laughed and gave the matter some serious consideration as two maids came into the breakfast room to replenish the tea and coffee pots.

There was a much more relaxed atmosphere now that the other guests had gone, and it was obvious even in the demeanour of the staff.

The late morning had a languid feel to it as if they might sit there drinking tea until dinner time and nobody would mind a bit. How James wished he could just stay there and forget all about the Duchy of Sandford and his ever-furious father.

“So, since I have never met or heard of Lord Cunningham before, am I to assume his estate is nearer to yours than mine?”

“You did not ask the lady?” Hector said with amusement.

“I did not get that far,” James admitted dolefully.

“Goodness, you are slowing up my dear fellow.” Hector was thoroughly enjoying himself. “But to answer your question, yes, Lord Cunningham’s estate is only a few miles from here. You could ride in the carriage for twenty minutes, or go across country on horseback in about seven, depending on your sense of urgency.”

“I take it they do not have acquaintances in the west of the county?”

“No. Why? Were you hoping to see her in someone’s drawing room quite by chance? I rather fear not. They are well-respected in society here in the east and rarely travel about much. Although I think Charlotte has an aunt on her mother’s side who is closer to Sandford.”

“So, I am rarely, if ever, to cross paths with the lady again.” James looked down purposefully. “Unless, of course, my finest and oldest friend, a boy by whose side I have stood year upon year, sees fit to help me.” James looked up at Hector with a conspiratorial expression.

“By which I assume you mean to visit me more? Pay me a little better attention that you have done of late?”

“Hector, do not look wounded. It does not suit you.” James laughed.

“Alright.” Hector recovered humorously. “So, what would you like me to do? Find out where my cousin is going to be and when? Engineer some pathway upon which the two of you could serendipitously meet?”

“Something like that, yes.” James poured himself another cup of tea from a tall, ornate china pot. “Perhaps you could find out which events Charlotte Cunningham will attend locally and, if they seem equally natural for you to attend, perhaps I could go with you.” He

paused thoughtfully for a moment. “Unless it would cause you a problem to attempt to secure me invites?”

“For heaven’s sake, when will you learn to capitalize on your status? You are one day to be a Duke, and it counts as much on this side of the county as it would on your own side. You shall have no concern in that direction. It will be a simple thing to get you an invite to every drawing room for miles if that is your want.”

James smiled and thought that he would never now capitalize on his status, as Hector put it, if only because he would not want Charlotte’s early thoughts on his character to be true.

And her opinion, he realized, was going to become more and more important to him now that he and Hector had a plan.

Chapter 5

“It is so late, Ruth, that I nearly did not pull the bell to have you come up here at all,” Charlotte said with something of a guilty tone. “But I have so much news for you that I am sure you will not mind it in the end.”

“I do not mind it at all, Miss. I never mind waiting up and hearing all the delights of the evening,” Ruth said genuinely, and Charlotte knew that she meant it.

Whenever Charlotte was out in society, particularly in the evenings at a dance, ball, or something similar, she always silently wished that she had Ruth there with her.

What fun the two of them would have if they were actually able to discuss the people they inevitably discussed from the vantage point of both having seen and heard the same things.

But it was more than that, and Charlotte knew it. She had many acquaintances but none she cared about anywhere near as much as she cared for Ruth. Charlotte and her maid seemed to be like two peas in a pod when it came to opinions and their likes and dislikes.

Ruth understood Charlotte better than anybody, and it was always so

much easier and so much more comfortable to be in conversation with a person who already understood you. Charlotte did not feel the need to perpetually explain for one thing, nor the need to apologize for being different for another.

“Oh, how I wish you could have been with me. How much simpler it would have been and how much more I would have enjoyed myself.”

“Did you not enjoy yourself at all?”

“Oh yes, I did enjoy myself, more or less,” Charlotte said and then thought about it for a moment. Yes, all in all, she had enjoyed herself, not least because she had been surprised by the most unexpected appearance of Lord James Harrington. “Yes, I did enjoy myself. But I would have enjoyed it so much better had I been there with you and not Olivia Orpington and Ariadne Beckwith.”

“Were they not good company this evening, Miss?” Ruth said with a smile, clearly knowing in advance that her mistress was going to answer in the negative.

“When *are* they good company, Ruth?” Charlotte blew out a great puff of air and sat down heavily on her bed as Ruth took the little stool from beneath the dressing table, pulled it towards her mistress, and sat down on that. “Which is not to say that I do not like them, I just wish I could feel them to be true friends.”

“Yes, you have said as much before. And I think if you do not mind me saying, that if you cannot feel that friendship, then it does not exist. What I mean is, there is no point in chasing something that is not readily available.”

“Very wise, Ruth,” Charlotte said and absentmindedly plucked at the little clips which held her hair up in place.

As she pulled them out, one by one, her rich chestnut hair began to fall around her shoulders and down her back in large, soft waves. Ruth, obviously keen to be doing something, rose from her perch on the stool, took the large paddle brush from the dressing table, and sat down on the bed next to her mistress and began to brush out her hair.

“But did they vex you in some way this evening?”

“Perhaps just a little. Well, maybe I was not vexed, just a little agitated. Or *exasperated* is probably more the right word.”

“So, what happened? And who else was there that I would be keen to hear about?” Ruth was always excited to hear the details of any social occasion that Charlotte attended, and Charlotte was so grateful for the fact that she had a person with whom she could gossip a little, even air a grievance or two, at the end of such an evening.

“Well, for one thing, and I probably should have said this in the beginning, Lord James Harrington was there.”

“The Duke’s son?” Ruth said with squeals excitement. “He was over here? I mean, does he not live on his father’s estate over in the west of the county? It would seem to be a long way for him to come for a simple dance. I mean, it was not a ball, was it?”

“No, it was nothing so grand. It was very nicely done, though, I must admit. Lady Darnley does put on a very nice spread, and the musicians were absolutely first rate. She does not have a ballroom as such, but rather a large room, a small hall really, and it is perfect for that sort of occasion.”

“Yes, yes, but as nice as it was, would a Duke’s son really make his way so far to attend it? I mean, is he even particularly acquainted with Lady Darnley? You have been there many times before and never once seen him. This is very intriguing.” It was clear that Ruth was already building a story around the event, one of her own, and Charlotte was already feeling herself swept up in it.

“That is a very good point, actually,” Charlotte said thoughtfully. “No, I cannot think for a minute that he is acquainted with Lady Darnley otherwise *everyone* in her acquaintance would know it. You know what Lady Darnley is like.” Charlotte gave her maid a significant look.

“Oh yes.” Ruth nodded her agreement, really only knowing Lady Darnley through the many verbal accounts given to her by her mistress.

“Anyway, I do not think that he was particularly invited by Lady Darnley. He was with Hector and Lawrence Hanover, and so I can only think that he was a tag-along of sorts.

Probably Hector secured him a proper invite, not that such a thing would be difficult to come by for a Duke’s son.” By the end of her sentence, Charlotte realized that she sounded a little dismissive again.

She could not shake the idea that James Harrington must, even if he hid it well, suffer certain ideas of grandeur and entitlement. Of course, she was bright enough to realize that her own prejudices were likely playing a great part in her assumption, but she did not let that spoil her theories.

“Miss, you must realize, surely, that he was there *by design*. There is nothing else for it.” Ruth, having finished brushing her mistress’ hair, sauntered across the room to take a fresh nightgown from the dresser drawer.

She laid the nightgown out on the bed and then sat down again, clearly having no intentions of yet helping her mistress to get undressed. After all, there was gossip to be had first.

“I do not know about that, but you are right, it is a little curious,” she said and wondered at her cousin’s friendship with Lord Harrington.

She had never heard him say that he was a particular friend of the son of the Duke of Sandford, although she had never heard Hector say that he was a particular friend of anybody. It was not that he was secretive, just that their families were not quite close enough to know so much about each other.

And Hector was almost ten years older than she was; he would hardly have given her chapter and verse on all his friends and acquaintances in the two or three visits a year that she and her father made to Hanover Hall.

For the most part, certainly whilst she was growing up, Hector was away at school. And when he had finished with Eton, there was, of course, Oxford, and so there was a great swathe of almost ten or eleven years when the two of them barely met.

However, Charlotte was quite determined that if she found herself in Hector’s company again in the near future, and it was safe to do so, she would question him thoroughly and without any compunction whatsoever.

Very likely it was the fact that Hector had such an easygoing nature

that Charlotte thought she knew him better than she did. Still, she was certain he was easygoing enough that he would put up with a little questioning from her when she got the chance of it.

“So, forgetting whether or not it was curious because we can come back to that later, what happened? What was he wearing? Did he look as handsome as he did before? Did he speak to you? Goodness, did you dance with him?”

“Ruth, Ruth!” Charlotte said and began to laugh. “Slow down.”

“I cannot slow down, I am just too excited. Did you speak to him?” Ruth went on determinedly.

“I could hardly avoid it. It was only a small gathering of forty or so, and he seemed to appear everywhere I chose to stand.”

“On purpose,” Ruth said and nodded in a way that would not be argued with.

“Yes, if you like,” Charlotte said indulgently. “And I *did* manage to speak to him a little.”

“What did you talk about?” Ruth said, getting to the very heart of the matter.

“Well, he enquired after my well-being,” she began and remembered how he had smiled at her from some feet away, making his approach in a most decided fashion.

And Ruth was right; he *had* looked as handsome as ever. He was wearing a very neatly tailored black tailcoat and breeches with a pale cream waistcoat and a white shirt.

His hair was immaculate, just as she had seen it before, and the perfect simplicity of his dress seemed to make him all the more handsome. It was as if the lack of an elaborate necktie somehow enhanced his very fine features.

“Good evening, Miss Cunningham. How very pleased I am to see you here.”

“And how very *surprised* I am to see you here,” Charlotte said with a certain dry suspicion that she hoped he had picked up upon.

“You think I am following you?” he said with a slow and pleasantly antagonistic smile.

It was as if he was goading her, and the look in his eye reminded her very much of the first time she had seen him when they had stared at each other with such determination outside Hanover Hall. It was almost a challenge, and Charlotte could not help being interested by

it.

“I should not like to accuse you of such a thing, really. What woman would accuse the son of the *Duke*?”

“Only one I can think of,” he said and laughed, his green eyes staring into hers.

Charlotte had found herself relieved that she had paid the proper attention to her appearance before coming out that evening.

Initially, she had not been destined to put in a great deal of effort, but in the end had decided to wear a fine ivory gown which had a simple green lace overlay. She felt very modern indeed in it, and Ruth had worked wonders with her thick chestnut hair, curling it into broad waves before twisting it up into a full and lustrous pleat on the back of her head.

What was even better was that she could see him noticing her effort, and she felt complimented without him even saying a word.

“Ah, Lord Harrington, please allow me to introduce you to my two friends,” Charlotte had said with the faintest hint of exasperation when Octavia Orpington and Ariadne Beckwith had made their way over to her and genteelly forced her hand.

She had no doubt that they had just heard from Lady Darnley that the handsome young man they were entertaining that evening was no less than the son of the Duke of Sandford.

The two young women were suddenly all guile and smiles and obviously had left their manners somewhere on the small journey across the room in their fervent bid to be introduced to him.

Charlotte knew the young women well enough but had thought them to be capitalizing on their acquaintance with her so that they might have some time in Lord Harrington's company.

At this point in the tale, Ruth also became exasperated. She tutted loudly at the idea that her mistress had been upended so early on by two young ladies she herself did not particularly like very much.

"Of all the things," Ruth said in an annoyed tone. "You would think they could have waited to be introduced. After all, if you were having a private conversation with Lord Harrington, did they not think that this sudden appearance would make things awkward?"

"I do not think they cared very much about any of that, Ruth. You are forgetting that these are highly bred young women and, as such, manners are very much an optional thing." Charlotte laughed, having amused herself greatly with her clever comment.

“You have been raised very well, Miss, and in such a fine home, and yet *you* would never behave that way; I know you would not,” Ruth said fiercely.

“Thank you, my dear.” Charlotte squeezed her maid’s hand, grateful as ever for her deep and abiding loyalty.

“I suppose they were trying to impress him?” Ruth went on, her countenance full of disappointment.

“Yes, they were perfectly coquettish in every movement and twisted this way and that to extract the offer of a dance each from the poor man.”

“Really!” Ruth hissed.

“My dear Ruth, Lord Harrington may dance with whomever he wishes.”

“Except it sounds very much to me as if he did not *wish* to dance with either one of them. It very much sounds to me as if his own good manners had him cornered.”

“Yes, I think you are right. You put it very well, Ruth.”

“And did *you* dance with him? Surely he has not come all this way

across the county to have nothing better than a dance with two such forceful young ladies.”

“It was all rather a matter of timing, my dear, and it did not work in our favour, I am afraid. Whenever Lord Harrington was free, I was not. It seemed that fate conspired to keep us very much apart.” She laughed lightly. “And it is true to say that once word had got around of the identity of the handsome young man, he was led around the room on so many little introductions that I did not get to speak to him again.

“Oh, how very annoying,” Ruth said thoughtfully. “Perhaps it would have been better if you were at a larger event. When there are more people bustling about, there is less excitement surrounding young men of note. They are better hidden, I think.”

“Yes, you are probably right. Still, it is over now, and I hardly think he will care to repeat the experience.” Charlotte laughed.

“I would have to disagree with you there, Miss,” Ruth said and rose to her feet, clearly getting ready to help her mistress into her night attire. “I do not think you can underestimate a man who has gone to such efforts just to see you.”

“If that is truly why he was there,” Charlotte said and, deep down, she rather thought she hoped that was the case. “But I suppose we will not

know for sure unless we see him here again.”

“You will see him here again; I am certain of it,” Ruth said and held out both of her hands to pull her mistress to her feet and get her ready for sleep.

Chapter 6

From the moment Lady Felicia Trent and her father, the Earl of Whittingham, arrived, James knew that he was in for a very dull evening indeed.

His father, obviously not taking on board any of the less than subtle hints from James that he was far from impressed with his current favourite as a choice of prospective bride for him, was determined to plough on regardless and do what so many other aristocratic fathers did; he would force together two people of opposing personality and expect them to be pleased with it.

“I believe you have lately been over at Hanover Hall, James,” Lord Whittingham said before they had even begun the first course.

Following a previous evening of several lengthy silences, it was clear that Lord Whittingham, a most determined father, was going to see to it personally that the conversation never faltered once.

For his part, James could not have cared less. The quieter the dinner was, the more opportunity he would have to relieve the monotony with a little daydreaming of his own.

And of course, as was his custom these days, the subject of his

daydreaming was none other than Miss Charlotte Cunningham.

Despite his best efforts to concentrate upon the pleasingly pretty appearance of Lady Felicia, his mind was always irresistibly drawn back to the gleaming red chestnut hair and bright blue eyes of Charlotte.

“Yes, I have made two recent visits to Hanover Hall. To my friend Hector, to be precise,” James said in a bid to be sociable without being at all encouraging to the matrimony-seeking father.

“It is three visits, is it not?” Felicia said, and James almost laughed; the woman really could not help but correct people.

“Yes, I suppose it is, Felicity.”

“*Felicia*,” she said smartly, and James smiled. “It is three, if you count your first visit, the sporting event,” she said primly.

James was trying to control his mirth, imagining standing at the altar with the young woman as she perpetually corrected the vicar performing the wedding ceremony. Well, at least there would be plenty of time for him to find an escape route and perhaps climb out of the vestry window.

“James,” his father said briskly with an air of annoyance.

“Yes, yes, it is three times, Felicia, you are quite right, as always.” He smiled broadly if only to cover for the fact that he had been very close to the point of laughing.

James had never thought of himself as a rude or mannerless man, but he understood that he had traits that could easily be considered to be so by others.

But really, it struck him that people were at their most amusing when they intended to be anything but. In his mind, everyday idiosyncrasies that were easily digested or overlooked by others seemed always pronounced and of great amusement to him.

It was not that he meant to judge people, rather that he always noticed a good deal about them and often found himself irresistibly fixing upon their little foibles.

That being said, Lady Felicia Trent’s perpetual correcting was far too pronounced to be considered a simple foible. In truth, it was a personality trait that he could hardly manage throughout a simple dinner, never mind a lifetime of alleged married bliss.

“Yes, I believe I am a little acquainted with your friend, Hector Hanover,” the Earl went on. “I have seen him at some function or other, but I cannot quite remember where. I have a notion that it was

at a ball somewhere more local to us than to Hanover Hall. Still, I daresay the location is of little consequence.”

“I had no idea you were acquainted, Sir,” James said and wondered if that was a lie.

He remembered that Hector had claimed to have set eyes on Lady Felicia, for he had pronounced her to be very pretty. Well, he was right there; Felicity Trent was certainly a very handsome young woman.

At just one and twenty, she was fresh-faced with the most wonderfully creamy rose skin he had ever seen. Her features were perfect, given that they were all of exactly the size one might expect with everything just where it ought to be. And in that, James had to admit that he found her rather uninteresting.

It seemed to be very much in keeping with the spirit of the woman that everything about her be in its correct place. Her nose was small but not too small; her eyes were large, but not too large, her lips were rosy, but not too rosy. All in all, her seeming perfection irritated him.

James knew that he would never have been drawn to Felicia Trent in the first place, but his meetings, as brief as they were, with Charlotte Cunningham, had made his feelings of aversion even more pronounced.

Charlotte was a beauty in a very different vein. She was a natural beauty, one who was not perfect in every way and, because of it, all the more *perfect* in his eyes.

Her shining chestnut hair was, perhaps, a little redder than some young ladies might be pleased with possessing, and her blue eyes were so bright that they were almost startling against it.

Her smile was not truly symmetrical either, raising up a little in one corner in a slightly sardonic fashion that had James snared in a trap from which he could do nothing to free himself.

That smile of hers had a certain significance; it was the sort of smile that knew very much more than it was giving away, that was for certain.

The truth of it was he had never seen a woman he thought more beautiful than Charlotte Cunningham. And as for character, he knew he could live ten lives and never find another woman with such a sharp wit and such a clever way about her.

“No, no, I am not truly acquainted with Hector Hanover. I believe my daughter spoke with him for a few minutes at the ball.”

“I did not speak with him, Father,” Felicia corrected gently. “And it

was an afternoon buffet and dance rather than a ball, held by Lord and Lady Egerton last summer.”

James bit his tongue as he wondered if the woman’s memory and determination to verbalize it at every opportunity knew no bounds.

Even Hector had not remembered where it was he had seen the young woman he thought so pretty. James amused himself for a moment by wondering just how Hector and Felicia would get on. He almost laughed again when he pictured Hector’s face and imagined his expression after she had corrected him seven or eight times. Yes, he would have to find some way to introduce them if only in the interests of science.

“Do you have many other acquaintances over in the east of the county, James?” Lord Whittingham said, and James could not help thinking there was more to the inquiry than simple dinner conversation.

Perhaps the man had some suspicions about James’ motives for spending so much time with his friend. But, of course, James knew he was hardly spending a great deal of time there; it was just that he had, perhaps, been once too often of late.

And yet, to him, it seemed all too little. He had only met Charlotte on three occasions now if he included the sporting event, as *Felicia*

obviously did.

When he had seen her at Lady Darnley's little dance, he had been almost startled by the depth of his pleasure. He had thought of her so much in between the first and second meeting that he wondered if he had exaggerated her charms and his attraction to them.

But seeing her in that wonderful gown in Lady Darnley's small hall had certainly shown him otherwise. She was as beautiful as he had remembered her, and her hair was gleaming under the light of so many candles in the chandelier.

The fact that he had not been able to spend much time with her on that occasion ought really to have been obvious to him beforehand. It was such a small gathering, and he was something of an anomaly in it, being the only true stranger among them and the son of the Duke at that.

In the end, he felt he had spent far more time trying to extricate himself from the tedious company of Octavia Orpington and Ariadne Beckwith than he had spent with Charlotte. He had not danced with her once, despite moving her way several times with every intention of asking her.

Hector, of course, had been greatly amused by it all, declaring his

friend to be the most inept romantic on all of God's green earth.

But Hector being Hector, he had quickly sought to improve things for his dear friend and, within a matter of just two weeks, had arranged another little invite for him.

This time, it was to the home of a mutual friend where Hector's father ordinarily played bridge twice a week.

Hector had not been there for years, a point the hostess made more than once during the afternoon and, worse still, within earshot of Charlotte.

Still, James did not think it such a bad thing that the object of his desire might realize the effort he was going to just to be in the same room as her.

Her father had attended that particular afternoon, and James had even found himself partnering the man for bridge for a while. Lord Lucas Cunningham's skill at the bridge table was very much on a par with his skill on horseback, and the two of them were roundly beaten in short order.

However, he liked Lord Cunningham and found him very easy, somewhat amusing, company. He could certainly see how it was that a young woman would be free to develop such an interesting

character as Charlotte's with such a father. And for that alone, James found himself rather admiring the old Baron.

"So, you are in the east again, Lord Harrington." On that particular afternoon, Charlotte had been one to approach him.

She was wearing a simple pale blue gown which suited her very well indeed, and her hair had been put up in a much easier style than he had seen it at Lady Darnley's dance.

It was all in keeping with the afternoon, and he could not help thinking her a picture of ease and grace all at once. And, once again, he found himself quite transfixed by her.

"Yes, I am once again visiting your distant relatives." He smiled a little mischievously.

"You seem to be visiting them with some regularity."

"I do, and I am pleased to say that you do not seem quite so disappointed by it as our very first meeting might have suggested."

"You mean to say that I was not particularly friendly when we first met, Sir?"

"Yes, I mean exactly that," he said and laughed, relishing the feeling

of being able to banter with her almost as he might with Hector.

He liked the idea that she was not at all offended by such pronouncements, and even though it was meant in jest, he thought that almost every other woman he had ever met would not take it so. But Charlotte Cunningham was not like any other woman he had ever met, and it was taking him a little time to get used to it.

“Whereas you were all ease and friendliness with your hard, green-eyed stare.” She laughed.

“Will you never let me forget that?”

“No, since it is among the incidents of most shocking behaviour I have ever witnessed, I think not.”

“I would be prostrate with apology if I thought that you were in the least bit shocked by me, Miss Cunningham.”

“Well, perhaps not shocked.” She laughed. “*Amused?* No,” she said and shook her head gently. “*Interested?* Not exactly.” She was counting them off on her fingers as he shook his head. “*Perplexed?* Yes! That is it! I was utterly perplexed, nay *bemused* by you.”

“In lieu of an actual compliment, my dear woman, I shall just have to accept it.”

“Oh, I think it was a compliment of sorts,” she said and smiled at him rather sweetly.

“*Perplexed* is a compliment?”

“Insofar as it is never dull,” she said and looked a little pleased with herself. “You see, if you behaved as a normal gentleman, I should very likely have forgotten you by now. But the fact that I was so perplexed, I think, warrants further study.”

“I am a specimen to you and nothing more,” he remarked and laughed.

“You *are* a specimen, Lord Harrington. But I am a very keen observer, so perhaps it is not such a bad thing.”

“I think it would be best if I simply take whatever I can get from you. *Accept anything*, that will be my motto henceforth.”

“And a very fine motto it is too.” She smiled and bobbed her head a little before excusing herself to partner her bungling father in another game of bridge.

When James brought himself back to the here and now, he realized that he was smiling to himself. He then quickly realized that Lady

Felicia Trent was smiling back at him, obviously believing his smile to be for her.

Oh, how he would love to correct *her* for a change! But it would be unkind and ungentlemanly.

“I do hope you will be able to attend the little garden party that my father’s cousin is arranging two weeks from now,” Felicia said hopefully.

“Two weeks?” James said and winced more dramatically than a stage actor might have managed. “Oh dear, I rather think I cannot.”

“And why is that, James?” his father said loudly, reminding him of his presence at the table.

“I am afraid I have already agreed to something and am engaged elsewhere,” James said somewhat crisply, annoyed at being questioned at the dinner table like a child.

“I presume it is over in the east somewhere? Something to do with Hanover Hall again?” The Duke sounded exasperated, but it was clear that he would save his real fury for later.

“You presume correct, Father,” James said and quietly thought that his father could do his worst.

He was going to Hanover Hall and the east and Charlotte, and nothing was going to stop him.

Chapter 7

It was the hardest thing in the world for Charlotte to appear calm and collected at the breakfast table when what she wanted to do most in the world was run away to her chamber as fast as her legs would carry her so that she might ring the bell for Ruth and tell her everything.

Of course, she could have told her father what was in the note, for he really was just the sort of father you could share such information with.

Still, she wanted Ruth to see it first to be on the safe side. Ruth always had good common sense about her, and she would know if Charlotte ought to mention it to her father or not. Ruth would have the wisest solution.

“Are you not eating this morning, Charlotte?” her father asked as he looked from his own well-stocked plate to her little empty one.

“Oh yes,” Charlotte said, knowing that the quickest way to have her father concerned about the note was to sit there not eating.

If she carried on as normal, he would not bat an eyelid. He would think that she had received an invitation from one of her acquaintances, the details of which he could most certainly live

without.

Charlotte forced herself to load her plate with a few items and to set about her breakfast in the calm manner she ordinarily did. She had stowed the note in the pocket of her gown, and it was almost as if she could feel it there, pulsating with a life of its own.

She knew, of course, that it could not be, but that small piece of paper in her pocket was precisely where her consciousness lay at that moment.

“So, do you have any plans for today, my dear?” Her father, who had just poured himself hot tea from the pot, seemed to be shrouded in clouds of steam.

How did he manage to make such an effort and performance of the simplest practical task?

“Nothing in particular, although I thought I might have a walk later on. This afternoon, perhaps,” Charlotte said, already laying the foundations for her secretive excursion. “What about you, Papa?”

“Oh, a little of this and a little of that,” he said as he cut a piece of sausage meat. “I thought I might have a few words with the gardener, just some direction about the placement of the new camellias.”

“I am sure he will manage very well, Papa,” Charlotte said and groaned inwardly for the gardener’s sake. “He has probably already picked out the best place for them depending on soil drainage and orientation for sunlight and what have you.”

“Oh, yes, I am sure,” her father agreed readily, but there was a look on his face which told Charlotte clearly that he was not going to keep his nose out of the gardener’s business. “But two heads are always better than one, are they not?”

“I daresay it depends on the heads,” Charlotte answered and chuckled quietly to herself.

“Beg pardon?”

“Nothing, Papa.”

Breakfast seemed to go on forever and ever, and her excitement had meant that she had no appetite at all. Still, Charlotte had made herself eat everything on her plate and do so at the normal speed before finally excusing herself from the table and sedately walking from the room.

By the time she reached the stairs, however, Charlotte had sped up considerably. She took the stairs very quickly and could hear the somewhat unladylike stamping of her feet on every step the faster she

went.

As soon as she reached her chamber, she pulled the bell rope that would see Ruth speedily making her way to her as she always did. Whilst she waited for her, Charlotte paced back and forth with the note open in her hand, reading his words over and over again.

After some minutes, there was a light tap on the door, and it opened immediately to reveal Ruth Clarkin.

“Ruth, how glad I am to see you,” Charlotte said excitedly. “Really, I have had to contain myself at the breakfast table and make such a performance of everything so that Papa did not suspect anything out of the common way that it is a wonderful relief to see the one person with whom I can say anything I like.”

“Your cheeks are so pink,” Ruth said and sounded a little concerned. “My dear, you look so warm. Are you unwell?”

“No, I am not unwell at all, Ruth,” Charlotte said and was keen to get to the main point of their meeting. “Although I suppose I am a little excited and agitated.”

“Whatever for?”

“Here, read this. I received it this morning at the breakfast table and

could hardly eat anything for my excitement.” Charlotte handed Ruth the note, and she immediately began to read it aloud.

“My dear Miss Cunningham,

I am currently staying at Hanover Hall and would be very pleased if you would consent to meet me this afternoon for just half an hour so that we might enjoy a walk. I shall be on the edge of Wolverton woods at one o’clock this afternoon at the gated entrance on the north side.

I am in hopes of seeing you there at that time,

Fondest regards,

James Harrington.”

When Ruth had finished reading it out, she was silent for a few moments as she re-read it again to herself. Then, when she was finished, she looked up at Charlotte excitedly.

“Did I not say it, Miss? Did I not tell you that Lord Harrington only makes his way over here so often now so that he might find himself in your company? Well, here is the proof of it. He wants to meet you and walk with you. Goodness me, this is exciting,” Ruth spoke in a flurry of words which seemed almost to be tripping over themselves to make their way out of the mouth.

“Yes, I think you are right. I am finally beginning to see that Lord Harrington really does seek me out.”

“Could you truly not see it before?” Ruth looked at her quizzically.

“I think I could see it, but I was not sure I could trust it. I think I have been a little concerned that Lord Harrington’s interest is nothing more than his determination to win a little competition that is set between us.”

“There is not really a competition between you; it was just how things began,” Ruth said sensibly.

“I still have my concerns that the Duke’s son might only be interested in winning.”

“Winning what?”

“Winning my heart perhaps,” Charlotte said uncertainly. “I mean, if he truly is as I suspected he might be in the beginning, then he is a man who is not used to people, particularly young ladies, making things difficult for him. I am worried that if I show any feelings towards him, that might be enough to have him crown himself the victor and walk away. Does that make any sense?”

“The sentiment makes sense; I understand it perfectly,” Ruth said quietly. “But used in terms of Lord Harrington, from everything you have so far told me about your encounters, I could not agree that it makes sense. I do not think it is an idea that at all tends towards his character. But still, I understand your fears, Miss.”

“You always make me feel better, Ruth. Really, anybody would think that you were the older of the two of us, not I.” Charlotte quickly crossed the room to the window where Ruth was still occasionally studying James Harrington’s letter by the light of the window.

“So, are you going to meet him?” Ruth smiled as Charlotte took her hand. “Please say that you are going to; I could not bear it if you did not.”

“Yes, yes. I am going to meet him. But do you think I should tell Papa?”

“Well, I do not think your father would have any particularly strong feeling on the matter,” Ruth said thoughtfully. “But if you do mention it to him, then he is going to insist that I go along with you as a chaperone.”

“Yes, perhaps that would be a good thing.”

“I am not sure that you really *need* a chaperone,” Ruth said gently.

“And it is hardly conducive to open conversation, is it? As much as I would like to be there and witness the romantic moments for myself, I do not think my presence would do anything other than upend the idea of romantic moments in the first place.”

“Then you think I should meet him alone?”

“Just think of it differently,” Ruth said in such a definite tone that Charlotte already felt confident in whatever plans she might be about to give. “Just imagine that you had gone out this afternoon for a walk to Wolverton woods and you had, by chance, happened upon Lord James Harrington. In those circumstances, it would be perfectly acceptable for you to have some sort of conversation with him and even to walk from one place to the other in one another’s company, assuming you are both going in the same direction. There would be nobody who would find anything to pass comment about in such a scenario.”

“You really are very clever, Ruth,” Charlotte said. “But I have the note.”

“You do, but there are only three people who know of the existence of the note; you, Lord Harrington, and me. There is no benefit in any of the parties revealing its existence, so I think you can be satisfied that half an hour of conversation walking with Lord Harrington is perfectly proper.”

“Right, then that is solved,” Charlotte said firmly. “Now, what ought I to wear?” She smiled brightly at her maid.

In the end, Ruth had helped her dress in a dark blue well-fitting but practical gown that she often wore for walking, so as not to draw her father’s suspicion.

The gown suited her very well, and its darkness always made her skin look light and bright. She wore a light spencer jacket to match, and her gloves and bonnet were also of the same shade.

The overall effect was of a smart walking outfit, something that was attractive and pleasing.

For the first time in their acquaintance, Charlotte felt a little nervous as she walked the short distance from Thurlow Manor to Wolverton woods.

She supposed it was because whenever they had previously met, James Harrington had come suddenly upon her, and nothing had been arranged between them. But now she was expecting to see him, making her way to the woods for just that purpose, her nerves had begun to unsettle her. Still, she would do her very best not to let it show.

“Good afternoon, Miss Cunningham.” As she made her approach to the gate on the north side of the woods, Charlotte could see that James Harrington was already there. He was on the other side of the gate and leaning on it, smiling broadly, and he seemed to look more handsome than ever.

He was wearing dark cream breeches and black boots with a tailcoat and waistcoat in a dull shade of green which actually suited him very well. As she reached him, she realized that the colour made the most of his beautiful green eyes.

“Good afternoon, Lord Harrington.” She smiled and inclined her head politely.

He opened the gate without a word and ushered her through before turning them both onto the main pathway through the woods. There were many other smaller pathways, and his intention to walk with her on a very open pathway where they might easily be seen by other walkers was quite a bold move, somewhat courageous perhaps.

Also, she thought it rather gentlemanly, for he was making it clear that he had no darker purpose for meeting her there without a chaperone.

He held out his arm for her to take, and she did so readily before they set off through the trees.

“I must admit, I did not think you would come,” he said and smiled his handsome smile at her.

“And why did you think that, Lord Harrington?”

“Because I suppose it was a little forthright of me to ask you in the first place, especially when we have only been in one another’s company on a few occasions. But really because I am never quite sure if you like me or not.”

“And why are you never quite sure if I like you or not? Am I not perfectly friendly?” Charlotte was pleased that they were already on their old, bantering footing.

Something about fast and clever conversation gave her confidence, or at least it settled the nerves she had felt when she had been in a more romantic frame of mind.

“Yes, you are perfectly friendly,” he said slowly and thoughtfully. “But friendliness is not always a sign of liking, is it?”

“No more it is, Sir,” she said and laughed. “In truth, I am extremely friendly with any number of people I do not like very much.”

“And am I one of them?”

"I think you know that you are not, Lord Harrington. After all, I would not be here if I did not like your company, would I?" Charlotte realized that her declaration was, perhaps, a little too honest, and she wished for a few moments that she could take it back.

"Well, I am very pleased to hear that," he said lightly. "Because I am bound to tell you that I like you very much indeed, Miss Cunningham. And I have liked you from the moment we met."

"By *met*, do you mean the staring competition, or perhaps when we were out riding at the back of the pack?"

"Both, and you are playing with me," he said and laughed. "But then I think you play with me all the time, do you not?"

"I hardly know what you mean, Lord Harrington," she said with as much innocence as she could muster.

"Yes, you do." He laughed and patted her hand as it lay lightly on his upper arm. "And I do not mind it at all; in fact, I like it. As long as I am still able to tell you what I truly feel underneath all the witty swordplay of our conversations."

"I would not wish to silence you if you had something you wished to say," Charlotte said and felt the tiny stab of nervousness again.

It seemed that whenever her thoughts, or their conversation, drifted away from their amusingly confrontational stance, Charlotte felt herself just out of her depth.

“Then I shall repeat that I do like you very much, Miss Cunningham. And I should also say that I will do whatever I can to find myself in the east of the county as often as possible. And if you do not mind me following you from place to place, I should like to see you on every occasion.”

“You need not follow me from place to place; you may visit me at home,” she said and laughed.

“Your father knows of my interest in you?” he said quizzically.

“No, not currently, but he would have no particular opinion on the matter. He would simply make you welcome in our home if you were to call upon us. And he is a man who wanders off with almost frightening regularity, so if you were to come to tea, there would still be great opportunities for what you might like to call *fatherless* conversation.”

“I really do think I like your father better and better the more I hear of him.” He smiled so genuinely that she knew he meant it, and she was glad to hear that he already liked her father.

“Well, that is settled then. You may call upon us anytime you wish, for my father and I do not receive so many visitors.”

“I had hardly known what to expect from this meeting of ours, Miss Cunningham. If I may be honest with you, I wondered if you might meet me here simply as a means of furthering some little contest between us. But I can see that you have not, and I am very glad of it.”

“Oh, dear me,” Charlotte said and began to laugh. “If I am honest with you, Lord Harrington, that was exactly what I had thought myself. I had, albeit momentarily, suspected that this might be part of some game of your own.”

“Well, perhaps we can agree to trust each other on this point at least?” he said and laughed also. “For I promise you most sincerely that I am not here to play any games, Miss Cunningham, however much I enjoy our friendly little confrontations.”

As they continued to walk, Charlotte had to admit to herself that his words, his open admissions, had given her a good deal more confidence than she had approached Wolverton woods with.

She believed him wholeheartedly when he said that he truly liked her, and she knew that she was beginning to genuinely like him also. *No*, she had liked him all along.

Her interest in Lord James Harrington had been born the moment she had looked back at him across the gravelled front of Hanover Hall. From the moment she had turned her eyes to squarely meet his, however defiantly, Charlotte had been mesmerized.

“Well, I did promise to have you returned after half an hour, and I shall keep my promise to you,” he said and laughed as he turned her around and began to head back in the direction from which they had come.

Charlotte, for her part, wished that the afternoon could go on forever.

Chapter 8

As James began to attend Hanover Hall with greater regularity, his valet had become an old hand at quickly packing whatever it was his master needed. He always took his valet with him, knowing how the man liked to be away from Sandford Hall whenever he had the chance of it.

And James liked Samuel Jones very much and was more than pleased to give his long-serving valet a few days respite here and there from the booming, bullying tones of the Duke.

“I think that is everything, My Lord,” Jones said before closing down the lid of the small trunk that James had begun to take with him to Hanover Hall by custom.

“Yes, you have made very short work of that, Jones. Thank you,” James said graciously. “And you have packed your own things?” he added and was pleased to see Jones’ eyes light up when he realized that he would, once again, be going along with his master.

“It will take just a few minutes, My Lord,” the valet said with a smile.

At that moment, the door to James’ chamber flew inward, and there stood his father. For a moment, James found himself inappropriately

wondering when the last time his father had actually attended his chamber was.

Very likely he had not walked into that room for many years, and James had a sudden recollection of it being almost twelve years ago when his mother had died.

“I see you are getting yourself ready to go off gallivanting again, James.” His father still stood in the doorway as if it was somehow displeasing to walk further into the room. “But I shall save you the trouble of continuing to pack.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Your valet may return later to reinstate your luggage to the wardrobe,” the Duke said and motioned with a tip of his head that Samuel Jones should leave them.

The valet, doing his very best to hide his disappointment that he and his master would not be getting away for a few days, hastily made his way out of the room, pausing only to bow at the Duke.

“It will not be possible for you to take your customary trip to Hanover Hall this time, James. There are Duchy matters to which you must attend, and I will not have this continual gadding about.”

“What Duchy matters? As far as I am concerned, I have attended too much which requires it. I have spent all week with the overseer and, as far as I am aware, there are no outstanding matters of Duchy business to attend to, or at least there are certainly *none* which are so urgent that I must disappoint my friend and insult him with my non-attendance.”

“Ah, you misunderstand me. There are more things to the matter of running a Duchy than the simple mechanics of it, my dear boy,” he said in a patronizing tone. “And since you still have not sat down with Charles Holt and I as promised to go through our list, I have been forced to make certain arrangements for you.”

“Ah, so it is the ongoing search for a bride for me, is it?” James snapped angrily.

How could he possibly tell his father of the true necessity of his visit to the east of the county? After all, even if the Duke was well acquainted with Baron Cunningham and his daughter, there was no way on God’s green earth that Charlotte would ever have made her way onto the list that he had drawn up with his scheming old attorney.

It would be pointless to tell his father not to worry, that he had found a most suitable young lady for himself; his father would never hear of it. James had visited Thurlow Manor several times and had a very

good idea of Lord Cunningham's wealth.

It was certainly a respectable wealth, something that many would be extraordinarily pleased with. But it was not the sort of wealth that the old Duke would be pleased to hear about, and Charlotte would certainly not come with the sizeable dowry that every young woman on his father's list would enjoy.

For one thing, Charlotte's father was not a man determined to have his daughter married away so fortuitously. It really was the case that his own idea was that his daughter's happiness should come first and foremost.

As long as the suitor was respectable, he might be a Duke or an attorney or anywhere in between. And so, James already knew that Lucas Cunningham would not play that game.

He would not sell his daughter away at such a high price when all that he wanted out of the situation was her own contentment. And that, in the end, was something that money could not buy.

Lucas Cunningham would make a very fine father-in-law, James had no doubt, but he had a certain way of doing things, and his refusal to play along with such matrimonial games would certainly not go in James' favour when it came to dealing with the Duke.

And even if the Baron did decide to do everything in his power to have his daughter become a Duchess, he could not possibly spare the sort of funds that the fathers of the listed women might.

All in all, James knew that he had been keeping Charlotte something of a secret, and he knew very well why. The moment his father heard of their regard for one another, he would undoubtedly do everything in his power to put an end to their association.

James wanted things to be further along than they were. He wanted to be at the point at which he was sure of Charlotte's heart, and she was sure of his. In that way, he would ask her to marry him and, securing her agreement he would simply present her at Sandford Hall as the woman he intended to marry. In the end, under such circumstances, it would be very difficult for his father to interfere.

It was these early, delicate stages which must be protected. This was the point at which, if his father had sufficient knowledge, he would seek to intervene.

James thought it a great shame that he could not trust his father, but to drop his guard would be foolhardy, for he knew the man and his ruthless determination well.

"I have arranged an afternoon tea here tomorrow with Felicia Trent and two friends of hers whose names I cannot quite remember," he

said and wafted his hand this way and that as if the two friends were neither here nor there. "And on the following evening, we have a dinner of several guests, chief among them being the Earl of Whittingham and Felicia. A good many of *my* friends are coming, and I will not have to sit and explain your absence."

"Quite so, Father," James said brightly, even though agitation burned in his veins.

He wanted so desperately to see Charlotte that he could almost not deal with his own disappointment in knowing that it would not come to pass on this occasion. But if he fought his father, if he made it so plain that he was determined to go to Hanover Hall, his father would start to suspect something.

As much as he could not bear it, James knew that he would have to go along with it for now. He had absolutely no intention whatsoever of marrying Lady Felicia Trent and could feel his heart beginning to harden towards the priggish young woman.

Of course, he knew that none of it was her fault. Her father was as determined as his, and it was likely that she had very little say in what became of her.

Still, he did not want her, and he would not have her. There was only one woman in the world he wanted, and he knew that all he needed

to do was to continue to court her until he had the confidence of both her and her father. All he needed was a little more time, and if he did not play the game his father had set for him, all would be known, and time would run out.

“Oh, I see,” the Duke said, and it was clear that he was instantly upended by James’ early capitulation. “Right,” he went on as if struggling for something to say. “So, it is settled then.”

“Yes, it is all settled.” James could hardly believe how very convincing he was.

He sounded for all the world as if he were looking forward to the pointless and tedious social events that his father had set him, and he once again imagined himself to be an actor on stage.

“I must admit I had expected rather more of a fuss. I had been quite ready for your objections on the matter.” The Duke seemed just a little less gruff and somewhat more curious.

“Well, as much as I enjoy seeing my old school friend and taking advantage of what I think is rather better countryside over in the east, my dear Hector will not evaporate simply because I shall not see him on this occasion. He will manage, I am sure.” James added a hearty laugh as if to set the seal on his little performance.

“I am very pleased to hear it.” The Duke went on. “You have spent a little too much time over there of late, and I think it would be more prudent for you to stay on this side of the county for a while. Especially when negotiations are at such a delicate stage.”

“Negotiations?” James said innocently.

“Between myself and Whittingham,” the Duke said by way of explanation.

“As far as that is concerned, Father, I am not entirely sure that I am ready to settle on Felicia Trent,” James said as delicately as he could. In truth, all he wanted to do was prevaricate and play for a little more time. “And I believe that Lady Penelope Colchester is a name that has come up between yourself and Charles Holt. I must admit, I find her rather an agreeable young lady,” he said and winced inwardly as he remembered her nodding and smiling and *quite literally* agreeing with every point he made.

Dear Lord, what a tedious young woman she was. Still, it would muddy the waters for a little while and keep his father’s suspicions out of the way. It would occupy the old Duke, perhaps even pacify him somewhat if James appeared to be engaging a little more in the process.

“Oh, you do, do you?” The Duke raised his eyebrows and smiled.

“Well, see how you get along with Felicia Trent over the next few days and then, perhaps we can arrange something with Lady Penelope and her father. No sense in settling for the first one you lay eyes on, eh?” His father looked at him in an almost conspiratorial way and, for a brief moment, James sensed a little closeness between them.

He realized immediately, of course, that it was based on absolutely nothing. His father could only see any worth in him if he behaved as he wanted, choosing his father’s opinions and wants over his own. As tempting as that tiny moment was, it was not worth a lifetime of battenning down his own desires and nature.

“Quite so, Father,” James said in a hearty tone.

As his father wandered away, and James looked at the already packed trunk, he felt his heart sink. The idea that Charlotte would be waiting for him upset him greatly, and he could not bear to think of letting her down, nor even her father.

Wasting no time, he sat down to write her a hurried letter, hoping that it would reach her before he had been due to arrive. More than anything, he could not bear to let her down.

He was falling in love with Charlotte Cunningham, and he knew there was no going back.

Chapter 9

Charlotte had been hovering listlessly all morning, moving from morning room to drawing room and back again. It had been some weeks since she had last seen James Harrington, and she was a little dismayed to discover how much she had missed him.

Still, he had sent her a message that he was now back with Hector and Lawrence Hanover at the hall and would be pleased if she would receive him for a few hours. Of course, Charlotte had immediately sent a message back to him at Hanover Hall to confirm that she had no prior engagements and would expect him for afternoon tea.

Her father, who had received the Duke's son now on no less than three occasions, was already comfortable with the whole thing. He was neither hopeful nor concerned. His daughter had a new friend whom she would either take to or not, and that was all there was to it.

Lucas Cunningham had no expectations of this burgeoning alliance, and his daughter could not be more pleased. It was a relief to her not to suffer the same pressures that many other young ladies of her status undoubtedly endured.

That her father made no demands of her, that he did not urge her into his own idea of a good match, was something for which she would

always be grateful. And it was something which made father and daughter very close indeed, for Charlotte loved him all the more for his well-developed common sense and his determination that his only daughter be happy and nothing more.

Charlotte often wondered if it was because she had grown up without a mother. She had been a little child when Lady Cunningham had died and had no recollection of the woman whatsoever.

As sad as that often made her, Charlotte devoted herself to treasuring her wonderfully close, always amusing, and often exasperating relationship with the father she adored.

He was loving yet allowed her to simply *be*, something which might have suggested a certain level of disinterest to the casual observer. But then, casual observers were likely used to watching fathers who plotted and schemed and constantly interfered; all the things which were foreign to the old Baron.

Lucas Cunningham was, in fact, inordinately interested in his daughter; interested in seeing her develop in her own way, within acceptable limits, of course. And in honour of his respect for her as a human being, never mind a young lady, Charlotte was always honest and careful never to behave in a way which would bring any kind of upset to him.

That was why she had very quickly admitted her new friendship with the son of the Duke of Sandford. Whilst she had omitted the element of pre-arrangement to their meeting in the woods, she had told her father about the walk they had shared nonetheless.

She was relieved when he simply accepted the whole thing, likely assuming that she had just happened upon the man when she was out on a solitary walk. But she had not had to lead him to that supposition; she had simply left out a detail or two. And that was as far as she was prepared to go regarding her father. From that point on, she had determined to be open and frank whenever discussion of Lord Harrington sprang up between them.

Just as predicted, her father's concentration when it came to fully entertaining the handsome young man had waned very quickly. It was her father's way to drift a little without appearing at all rude or dismissive.

He just had a nature which was easily distracted, and whilst he was always polite and took tea with them, often some issue or matter of the household would occur to him, and he would excuse himself to deal with it; more often than not forgetting to return to them at all.

"You are hovering, my dear. Am I to take it you are all fluttering nerves and romantic notions as you wait for your young suitor to arrive?" Her father appeared so suddenly in the drawing room that

Charlotte gasped. “Oh, I am sorry. I did not mean to startle you whilst you were so deep in daydreaming.” Lord Cunningham laughed warmly.

“Papa, you must not tease me,” Charlotte scolded lovingly. “And no, I am perfectly myself. I am as sane and sensible as ever I was,” she lied.

Her father’s knowing smile was enough to let her know that he had already perceived otherwise, but she was determined to hold her ground, hoping all the while that she would not blush.

“If you say so, my dear. But having spent the last hour trying to concentrate on the household accounts in my study to the accompaniment of your little feet pacing from morning room to drawing room, I could only conclude that you have been peering nervously out of windows on every elevation of the house. Obviously, I was mistaken, so please forgive me.” His amusement was clear, and Charlotte, despite feeling embarrassed, could not help being amused by his little piece of comedy.

“You are not teasing me anymore, Papa; you are mocking me,” Charlotte said with a laugh.

“Only gently, Charlotte.” Her father came further into the room and kissed her cheek.

She was, indeed, standing by the window and peering out expectantly, and her father made much of joining her and looking out for the Duke's son also.

"Papa." She sighed and scowled at him.

"Alright, alright," he said and held his hands up in surrender. "But do come away from the window and sit for a while. Allow yourself to relax, Charlotte. Your young man is already smitten, and you have no need to turn yourself into a wreck of nerves."

"You cannot know he is smitten, as you call it. And even if he is not, I shall survive the experience."

"Ah, now there is *my* daughter. The sharp little lady I recognize." He laughed again.

"Oh dear, am I really so sharp?" Charlotte sat down on the couch, and her father took the armchair opposite.

"Only regarding your wit, child. I did not mean to suggest you had any sharp ways to your nature. You are perfectly adorable. In *my* opinion, of course." He was still teasing her, although she knew he spoke the truth. "And you might profess to such self-sufficiency, but remember that you are my daughter, and I can see a little further into your heart than you might think."

“Well, I daresay I am a little nervous. Perhaps because it has been some weeks since I last saw him,” Charlotte finally admitted.

“Charlotte, am I right in remembering that you told me Lord Harrington is to come to Thurlow Manor today for afternoon tea?”

“Yes, Papa.”

“I am almost afraid to point out to you that it is but eleven o’clock, Charlotte, and you have at least two hours before any sort of vigil needs to be set up at any of the windows of this house.” He laughed gently. “Why not seek out Ruth and chatter to her for a while. Take some early tea of your own in the morning room; anything to take your mind off your nerves.”

“Goodness, is it only eleven o’clock?” Charlotte winced.

“Yes, my little dove.”

“Then I think I should seek Ruth out for a while.”

“Jolly good. Then perhaps I might be permitted to continue with my accounts without the tip-tap of your feet in the corridor outside?” He raised his eyebrows. “Otherwise, I might only have a few minutes to spend entertaining this young man of yours.”

“Of course, Papa.” Charlotte laughed, knowing that her father, with or without the household accounts being complete, would find some other little detail of huge importance that would take him away from the afternoon tea less than twenty minutes into it.

“Then I shall leave you for now.” He rose to his feet and left her with a warm, fatherly smile.

By the time James Harrington finally arrived, his excitement at seeing Charlotte again was so intense it surprised him.

She looked as beautiful as ever in a simple ivory gown that complemented her creamy complexion and chestnut hair and made him stare at her just a little too long for a polite afternoon tea with her father.

“Good afternoon, Lord Harrington,” the Baron said, already on his feet and smiling as he strode across the drawing room to greet him.

Whilst the two men bowed at one another respectfully, James let his eyes stray to Charlotte once again. How he had missed her these last weeks, and how he silently cursed his father for keeping the two of them apart.

“Lord Cunningham, how very nice it is to be here at Thurlow Manor

again,” James began brightly. “And Miss Cunningham, I trust you are well?” He fixed her blue eyes with his own, fully expecting to see some annoyance or consternation for his lengthy absence.

“I am well; I thank you.” She narrowed her gaze, and he realized she was amused.

No doubt she had easily read his concern and knew he was troubled by the idea of a less than welcoming reception from her. How clever she was. How much she observed and perceived.

The three of them settled down nicely, and their tea tray was delivered in very good time. The conversation was light and comfortable, and James found himself pleased once again by the Baron’s company.

As always, the Baron showed an interest in James as a man, not James as a title or a stepping stone to an elevated status of some kind.

“Have you been with Hector and Lawrence again, Lord Harrington?” Lord Cunningham asked conversationally.

“Yes, Sir,” James said respectfully and was gratified to see Charlotte’s pleasure in his mode of address to her father. “I am pleased to be seeing more of my old friend. We spent so much of our youth and educational years together, but the years in between have seen the

little distance between our houses seem to grow. I am keen to shorten that distance, for Hector has always been the finest company.”

“Yes, he is a fine young man,” Lucas Cunningham agreed. “Silly as the day is long, of course, but perhaps that is part of what makes him the fine young man he is.” He laughed. “Of course, Lawrence was always a little irreverent himself in his youth. Always had me laughing at some jape or other.”

“Yes, I have always suspected Hector to be a chip off the old block, as it were.” He smiled and became aware that Charlotte was studying him as he spoke.

For a moment, James hoped his appearance was not found wanting. He knew he could be a little vain, but he liked to look smart and knew himself to be a far cry from his father, who was sloppy in his own habits.

He knew he was as well dressed as ever in a dark blue tailcoat and waistcoat with pristine ivory breeches. Jones, his valet, had polished his black knee boots to perfection, and his hair, as always, was perfectly trimmed.

With his confidence restored, James knew himself to possess a certain clean-cut handsomeness which he hoped Charlotte liked. But he wanted her to be attracted to more than that. He wanted her to find

the inside as attractive as the outside and wished they could have a little time alone. He was always better able to show her who he really was in those tiny slices of private time they occasionally found themselves enjoying.

He determined that, should they enjoy such time today, he would make it count.

“I think we have an engagement in common in a fortnight, Lord Cunningham,” James said and turned to look at Charlotte, pleased that she looked a little startled to have her secret study of him observed.

So, she *had* been looking at him.

“Have we indeed?” the Baron said, and James could see Charlotte stifling a laugh.

The Baron was rather a wonderful old buffer, and it was clear to James that he could not bring to mind any engagement at all.

“Yes, it is the summer ball to be hosted by the Earl of Morley. Hector tells me you are acquainted, Sir, and that you will have undoubtedly received an invitation,” James went on and could see the amusement in Charlotte’s eyes.

“Oh yes, indeed,” Lord Cunningham said vaguely, his eyes narrowing as he stared off into the middle distance, clearly wondering if he had remembered to respond to the invitation at all. “Now then, if you will both excuse me for a few moments?” he said and hardly looked at the two of them as he rose to his feet and wandered towards the door. “I shall be back with you shortly,” he called over his shoulder before departing altogether.

“I am bound to say that it is unlikely my father will return,” Charlotte said, and he saw her broadening smile of amusement. “For he will now, as we speak, be turning his desk upside-down to discover the whereabouts of this invitation. You must forgive him; he is a little careless with such things.”

“But he is careful enough that he raised such a fine and beautiful daughter, and so I think he must be forgiven everything else.” James looked at her intently, his sudden desire for her becoming something he could not ignore. “And I am quietly grateful for a little time alone with you.”

“Are you indeed?” Charlotte said in her teasing tone. “Perhaps I should call for Ruth to chaperone me for a while, especially since we are unlikely to be interrupted by my father for the rest of the afternoon.”

“Ruth?” he said and raised his eyebrows.

“Yes, my dear Ruth. She will guard me closely; I can tell you.” She smiled, and he remembered Ruth was very likely the fair-haired young woman who acted as Charlotte’s maid.

“You must tease me, must you not?” James laughed. “And no, please do not call for your maid; I have been suffering all manner of torments not seeing you these last weeks.”

“And now you are playing with me, Lord Harrington, for I shall not believe for a moment that you have suffered torments of any kind.” Her blue eyes were cool and amused.

“Then you clearly do not know how well I regard you. Not to mention how much of my time is spent in pleasing thoughts of you.” He spoke seriously, and he could see that Charlotte was taken aback by his sudden intensity.

She looked so barely flustered that anybody else might not have noticed it. But James had made a study of Charlotte Cunningham and could see she was struggling to keep her composure.

He knew he should rein it in a little, but he wanted her to know his feelings; he wanted to make their moments alone count. Instead of backing away, he stared at her fervently, not releasing her from his gaze for a second.

“You are staring at me again, Sir, just as you did that first day at Hanover Hall,” she said in a voice that was quieter than normal.

“Can you blame me? I stare at you now for the same reason I stared at you then. Only now the compulsion to do so has become so strong that it is truly something I cannot fight.” He was still staring and smiled when she finally blushed.

“Lord Harrington,” she said in a low and breathless voice.

“Can you not call me James, instead? Are we not drawing ever closer, Charlotte?” He knew he was pushing her too far, too fast, but he had missed her terribly and was more affected by her presence than he could put into words.

Before she could answer, the door to the drawing room opened again, and her father bustled in holding the previously discussed invitation aloft rather triumphantly.

“There, you see,” he said as if he had fully expected them to have discussed his forgetfulness whilst he was gone. “I have not only found the thing, but I see from a little annotation I have made here in the corner,” he enthusiastically pointed to said annotation, “that I have responded in the affirmative.”

“Oh, I am pleased. Papa,” Charlotte said and sounded much more relieved than the situation warranted.

James realized that her father’s sudden reappearance had been welcome to Charlotte. He knew he had, perhaps, gone a little too far, been a little too intense, but he was not sure he regretted it.

After all, Charlotte simply looked a little out of her depth, not dismayed or repulsed. Her father’s presence would no doubt give that proud young woman the opportunity to gather herself again, to hide her little vulnerability from James. But he had seen it, and it pleased him a little; she was affected by him.

“Then I shall see you both at the ball?” James returned to his bright and friendly manner with no hint of the seriousness of just moments before.

“Indeed, you shall, Lord Harrington.” Lord Cunningham settled back down into his seat, and James realized, with an inward sigh, that it likely heralded the end of their few moments alone.

Still, he had the ball to look forward to, and he was sure he would manage the next two weeks they were to be apart again. *Just.*

Chapter 10

In the end, the next fortnight dragged along interminably slowly for James. He had almost written to Charlotte in between visits to feel he had some other contact with her but judged he had been a little too forward at their last meeting and should give her time to adjust.

James was sure he had made his growing feelings for her clear, but he also knew that such things could not be rushed, at least not with an intelligent, confident young woman like Charlotte Cunningham.

If he went in at full speed, she would no doubt suspect him of some game or other and back away. They had both wondered at the other's intentions before now, and he knew it was because of their frank teasing and lively conversations.

But James could not regret those conversations for a moment, for it was their very banter which had drawn them together and made each of them interesting to the other.

The competition had made Charlotte cautious, though, and James knew he would have to show her more of himself in the future, the man beneath the charm and amusement.

“Good morning, My Lord.” Charles Holt, his father's attorney, seemed

to appear from nowhere.

James had been making his way from the drawing room to the entrance hall, intent upon taking out his finest horse for a morning ride. He had not seen where Holt had come from and had the same creeping sensation of mistrust he always had in the dreadful man's company.

"Good Morning, Holt,

" James said crisply and thought that he had not seen the attorney since he had been forced to look over the list of eligible young ladies in his father's study.

James eyed him curiously for a moment and wondered if Holt was back at Sandford in connection with that same quest today. And if Charles Holt had been a better man, one he could trust, James would have asked the question outright.

But the attorney was not a man James had ever trusted. He always gave James the impression of a man who both hated and admired his employer at the same time, something he instantly equated with envy.

Of all the people who worked in and around the great hall, Charles Holt was the one James liked the least. He had never had any sort of sympathy with the man and had never fallen into comfortable

conversation as he generally did with the household staff.

There was something in the man's eyes which always seemed dead, like a landed fish. James could describe it in no better way. And he thought that a man with no light in his eyes whatsoever was a man who could never be relied upon. Holt had always struck James as a man who would switch allegiances at the drop of a hat if it suited him.

Perhaps he had an innate ruthlessness that the Duke recognized. The man and his fish-eyed stare had worked at Sandford since before James was born, and a darker nature would certainly explain why James' father had retained the man for so many years.

James did not linger as he would have done with just about anybody else. He would always stop for long enough to enquire after a maid or footman's well-being or at least comment upon the weather. Anything to let them know that he did notice them, that he paid them a consideration that their master, the Duke, never did.

But he could not stand and pass time with Charles Holt. He just had nothing to say to the man, and so he walked on, striding out through the main entrance and away into the pleasantly warm morning.

Charles Holt stood in the Duke of Sandford's study with his hands clasped lightly behind his back as was his custom.

Charles had always thought it a particularly good stance, showing neither nerves nor over-confidence, setting just the right tone for any and all meetings with the man who provided the larger part of his very healthy income.

He had been the attorney to the Duchy of Sandford for most of his career, and Charles was entirely loyal to the Duke. His loyalty was, however, the sycophantic kind which was, by its very nature, tinged with envy and hatred.

The truth of the matter was that Charles Holt's loyalty was largely towards himself and his aspirations to be the wealthiest attorney in the whole county. His status was already somewhat elevated given his most prestigious client, but Charles wanted more; Charles always wanted more.

"And so, you see, Holt, I have an ever-growing suspicion with regard to my son's activities," the Duke continued to talk.

He had made himself entirely comfortable in his broad chair, leaning forward over his growing belly to lean his elbows on the mahogany desk. He peered at his attorney through keen blue eyes, searching for any sign of a wandering attention.

“I see, Your Grace,” Charles said with a voice dripping reverence, all the while his annoyance at standing whilst his master sat growing.

Charles was a complicated man, torn between duty and self-enhancement, and he often surveyed the master he would do anything to please with a silent, secret loathing.

The Duke was growing fatter by the day, and his hair, that dreadful thinning pale straw, was over-long, making him look more like a beggar than a Duke at times.

“He thinks he can divert my attention with his attempts at amiability, but I am nobody’s fool, Holt,” the Duke rumbled on.

“Quite so, Your Grace.”

“He pretends to study our list, Holt. He makes pleasing little noises about this lady or that lady. But I know him to be playing me false. He is prevaricating, and he thinks himself very clever with it. I think it is time I showed the milk-sop a lesson.”

Charles Holt never ceased to be amazed by the animosity which always rose when the Duke talked of his only son. It was true to say, of course, that the Duke was a man who was always angry about something or other.

So much so that his rough and blotchy skin, the complexion of a man who ate and drank too much for his own health's sake, was often so deep red with fury it was almost purple.

Charles wondered that the man had not keeled over with a seizure or something worse before now and knew it was something which could not be ruled out in the future.

Still, Charles Holt could only hope it was the very distant future. He did not rate his chances of retaining his position within the Duchy very highly if and when James Harrington took his father's place.

If there was someone on God's earth he despised more than the Duke, it was his son. Just the thought of the young man brought a light sneer to the attorney's face. The Duke approved, of course. He liked people to agree with him, if only regarding their physical countenance.

"How so, Your Grace? Is there something I can help you with?" Charles' practiced tones were as second nature to him.

If he could do anything at all to upend James Harrington, he would do it with gusto. He had always despised the young Duke-in-waiting, even when he had been nothing but a boy.

Charles had seen how the child followed in his mother's footsteps instead of his father's, as ought to have been natural. He was a learned child who had carried the practice on into adulthood, but it was the sort of learning that thought itself reasonable and clever, always glib and flippant when he should have been serious.

But Charles thought that it was often the case that young men who were intended for greatness by dint of their birth rarely took their responsibilities seriously. Charles, on the other hand, would have made a much better Duke. If he had been born higher up in the world, he would have made the very most of it.

"I am convinced that my son has some romantic intrigue or other over in the east of the county. That is why he continually visits that pointless young man, Hector Hanover."

"Yes, Your Grace; I am familiar with the Hanover family," Charles said dismissively, letting his master know that he thought as little of them as he did.

Charles would, of course, have thought highly of the Hanovers if that was the Duke's leaning. He would bend in whichever direction his master did as if he had no will of his own.

"I can find no other explanation for it all. For one thing, as I have already mentioned, he is travelling east with increasing regularity of

late. For another, his little games here at Sandford have excited my suspicions greatly.” The Duke looked bilious, and it was clear his mood was deteriorating.

Father and son could not have been more different, and Charles knew that it was *that* more than anything else which lay at the root of the Duke’s determination to rein James in.

James Harrington was clever, or at least he thought he was, in just the way his mother had been. The Duchess had been a constant source of irritation to Charles, largely because she was one of the few people who saw right through him to the very heart of what he truly was; a self-serving little sycophant.

James Harrington could see it too, and Charles had always recognized that same look in the eyes of the Duke’s son. Likely that was why he despised him so much, however many other slants and angles he might come at the whole question from.

“Games, Your Grace?” Charles was starting to feel a little bilious himself; a mental image of the shrewd green eyes of James Harrington always had a detrimental effect on his humour.

“Yes, Holt, games.” The Duke looked pleased to be drawn out a little on the subject, for he was a man who was extraordinarily fond of airing his views and theories on any subject at all. “For instance, take

Lady Penelope Colchester,” the Duke went on.

“Yes, the daughter of the Earl of Paynton,” Charles supplied pointlessly.

“Yes. Well, my son gave me to understand that he had something of an interest in her. He went to some lengths to have me slowly put off old Whittingham and his daughter, Lady Felicia, in favour of Lady Penelope.” He shook his head in annoyance. “Said he thought he might prefer her to Lady Felica, and so I arranged a string of events with Lord Paynton and his daughter.”

“It did not go well, Your Grace?”

“It did not go well at all,” the Duke said, and Charles could not help thinking that the Duke was every bit the fool he had claimed not to be only minutes before.

In the same circumstances, Charles knew that he himself would have seen right through the little charade. He would have suspected James Harrington before the dreadful young man had opened his mouth. That his own father had not seen to the truth of the matter sooner was just grist to the mill of Charles Holt’s bitterness and envy; why had he not been born to be Duke? He would have done a much better job. He was so much more intelligent.

“The young lady is precisely what the Duchy needs too.” The Duke seemed a little more subdued now that he was musing. “Really. Pretty face, quiet, agreeable. Perfect qualities in a wife.” He was almost mumbling to himself, and Charles wondered if the old Duke was wishing he had chosen so well, given that the late Duchess had been far too clever for her own good, even if she had been a beauty.

“And her father is one of the wealthiest men in the county. Not to mention the fact that he is of the sort who will pay a King’s ransom to have his own status elevated by his daughter’s marriage. Nothing could be better.” The Duke coughed loudly without covering his mouth. Charles winced at the idea of breathing in the foul breath from deep within his master’s lungs. “And Whittingham is the same! Felicia is a little annoying with her priggish manor, but that could easily be crushed when the match is made.”

Charles had heard all of this before; the virtues and fortunes of the young ladies in question. He had helped the Duke to compile the list of young ladies suitable to marry his son, after all, and had seen to it himself that the two aforementioned women were at the top of that list.

Of course, Charles had put them there for financial reasons only. He could not have cared less what sort of wife James Harrington found himself tied to in the end. In fact, the more disagreeable, the better. It would serve the smart-talking young man right, after all.

“But with Lady Penelope, it was obvious. He has no interest in the woman at all, and I could see it on the first of the engagements I had arranged. There was no regard there. In fact, I think he quietly mocked her although the lady herself likely did not notice. She is not terribly sharp at such things, which I think is yet further evidence of her eminent suitability as future Duchess.” He coughed again, and Charles held his own breath for some moments until he thought the danger of breathing in the murk had passed.

“No, he is playing with me now, dragging the thing out and placating me as best he can. I should have realized immediately that he spoke so falsely. James never agrees with me if he can help it, and even when he does, he is always careful to be flippant and sarcastic.”

“I see, Your Grace,” Charles said with restraint when he had wanted to agree wholeheartedly.

Still, he was just the attorney and, despite the Duke’s own grievances towards his son, Charles would never get away with open agreement. It was not his place to comment upon his betters.

His betters! In talking of James Harrington, Charles almost ground his teeth at the notion of that young man being his better in any respect.

“So, we shall play him at his own little game, Holt.” The Duke

brightened considerably now that they were getting to the planning stage of the conversation.

“Your Grace?” Charles’ legs were beginning to ache from standing so rigidly for so long, and he wished his master would simply get on with it.

“Yes, I want you to follow him to Hanover Hall this time. He is to return before he has even been back here a fortnight. This time he claims to be committed to some ball or other. Lord Morley is said to be putting it on.”

“I see, Your Grace.”

“I want you to take up a post somewhere close by. Be sure you are not seen, but do what you can to follow James whenever he leaves the hall.” The Duke’s tone had lowered in volume and become something far more conspiratorial. “Find out where he spends his time and with whom. If there is a lady at the centre of this, you must root her out, Holt.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Charles had to stop himself smiling.

He rather liked the sound of the task the Duke had handed to him, and he knew he would relish the opportunity to be instrumental in upending James Harrington. After all, he knew the man would never

keep him on when it came his turn to be the Duke of Sandford so, as far as Charles was concerned, he had nothing to lose.

He truly hoped that Lord Harrington had a woman he loved over in the east and, what was more, he hoped *he* could be the one to wield the shovel and dig a hole under the self-satisfied man.

It would do Charles no end of good to succeed in this. It would make his master all the more generous, and it would give Charles the personal satisfaction of ruining things for James.

“And if you do find a young lady, you must not come back here until you have made enough enquiries to identify her. That is all I shall need from you for now. I daresay I might care to employ your services further in this business, but at present, just a few facts will do.” The Duke looked almost as if he had the news he was looking for already.

He was clearly convinced that his suspicions surrounding his son’s behaviour were right. “I need to know if there is a woman and, if so, who she is. Once I have that vital information, I shall decide upon my next objective.”

“Very well, Your Grace.” Charles gave a light tip of his head.

“Be very careful not to be seen, Holt. Not only by my son, but by that valet of his, Samuel Jones. He is irritatingly loyal to my son, and he

would, of course, easily recognize you. You must have a care and employ only the most trustworthy driver to take you to the east. It must not be anybody connected with this household.”

“Quite so, Your Grace.” Charles could easily see the sense in his master’s words.

The household staff at Sandford, given the opportunity, would turn their coats inside-out and forsake their master in favour of his son.

They were all weak-willed in Charles’ opinion, choosing to throw their admiration upon a younger man who would be unlikely to work them as tirelessly as their current master did.

No, Charles did not trust any of them. In fact, Charles did not trust anybody. But money always did the trick, as far as he was concerned, and so he would hire his driver well.

“So, my son is due to return to the east by the end of the week for this ball. Does that give you time enough to make all the necessary arrangements?”

“Yes, Your Grace. I shall start preparing today.”

“Good,” the Duke said firmly. “Then I shall see you again when you have made some progress.” He looked away from Charles, dismissing

him in the bluff and arrogant manner he always chose to dismiss his staff with.

But Charles was not staff. Charles was a clever, resourceful, loyal attorney, and the Duke would soon know exactly how valuable a man Charles Holt really was.

Chapter 11

James, unable to wait until the evening of the ball to set eyes on Charlotte again, called upon her and her father at Thurlow Manor in the afternoon. She was surprised to see him, and he knew he could not take up too much of her time.

As beautiful as she was quite naturally, she would very likely have plans to spend some time that day on preparations for the evening ahead.

But he wanted to see her; he wanted to deepen that closeness between them whilst he still had his father held at bay and believing his feigned interest in Lady Penelope Colchester.

He needed time for Charlotte to get to know him, for he knew he could secure no understanding from her without it.

He had hoped to do just that on his meeting with her that day, but her father had kept to their company this time, albeit he was extremely pleasant and unintentionally amusing until he had suggested that the two of them have a little walk around the Manor.

James had initially been thrilled by the prospect until Ruth Clarkin had appeared, cloak and bonnet at the ready, to come with them.

It was such a proper thing for Charlotte's father to have done that it ought not to have come as a surprise to James. After all, the Baron was a cultured man, and he was well respected in society, not a savage who was bringing his daughter up to be the same. And yet it seemed a little contrary to the man's way. Thurlow Manor was small, and the couple could easily be seen from any number of windows in the Manor house as they walked.

All in all, it would have struck James as more in keeping with the character of the man that he not even *think* of such trifles and simply leave them to it, as he had done so many times before.

Why would a man who had left them alone behind closed doors send them out with a chaperone into the open-air where they might be seen by anybody anyway?

But Lord Cunningham was a little eccentric, it was true, and James was certain that there was no more to it than that. Cunningham was not an artful man, and it seemed unlikely that there was any particular intention at all in his actions. In fact, it had rather occurred to James that the whole thing was more an act of kindness to the maid, a bid to get her a little fresh air and company.

Now that, as far as peculiar behaviour went, was far more in keeping with the man. To rescue his daughter's maid from being a little left

out seemed to James to be something that would appeal to Lucas Cunningham's slightly off-kilter character.

Ruth Clarkin had kept a little distance, it was true to say, but it seemed that Charlotte could not bear to have the young woman trailing behind. She continually called her to them and included her in conversation. And Ruth Clarkin, for her part, made for rather a strange sort of servant.

It was clear to James that she was a well-educated woman, conversing easily with her mistress. It was also clear to him that the two of them were on rather friendly terms, although given his own closeness to Samuel Jones, his valet, he could well understand it.

And yet, there were fewer boundaries between the women, he was sure. There was something about Ruth Clarkin that made him think of the phrase, *she was neither fish nor fowl*.

It was as if she was not quite the servant, but not quite a gentlewoman either. She was somewhere in between, almost in the style of most governesses. Someone of better breeding who had fallen on hard times. And yet he did not think that was particularly the case for Ruth Clarkin.

Anyway, as pleasant as she was, at least the young woman was not to be at the summer ball. He knew that opportunities to talk alone with

Charlotte might not present themselves, but he would look forward to it as if they would. He would remain positive.

The visit to Thurlow Manor had still been very enjoyable, and James had felt relaxed and excited all at once in Charlotte's company. But he left her after only an hour, knowing she would want the time to get herself ready.

And so, James made his way back to Hanover Hall to retire to his chamber for the rest of the afternoon. He would see Charlotte again that evening at Lord Morley's summer ball, and an hour's sleep would do him the world of good.

Not only that, but James intended to pay firm attention to his appearance for the evening. He knew he was, perhaps, being just a little vain, but Charlotte seemed to enjoy his smart, even immaculate, appearance, and he found himself in a position of only wanting to please her and nobody else.

As he lay on the bed and stared up at the ceiling of the chamber at Hanover Hall, James still wished he could have had just a few minutes alone with her that afternoon.

Ordinarily, they managed several minutes, one time even an hour, whilst her father disappeared on some sudden little errand that was almost always of no consequence whatsoever.

Still, he liked Lord Cunningham, and he liked his eccentric ways even more. It was those eccentric ways, after all, which had afforded him so much more time alone with Charlotte than he would have enjoyed under any other man's roof and with any other man's daughter.

Not that he had taken advantage of it, not in any sinister way at least, but he did like to talk to her without the constraints of other company. It seemed to change things every time they had such time alone; they always came out of it knowing each other a little better than they did before. Ten minutes in private company was worth ten days in a crowd as far as James was concerned.

But he knew it was not time and progress enough yet that he could ask her to marry him.

Some weeks, possibly even months would have to pass before he could do such a thing and be assured of an affirmative answer from her. Charlotte Cunningham was certainly not the sort of young lady who would agree to a proposal made so hastily, not even from the son of the Duke. Perhaps *especially* from the son of the Duke.

Then there was his father to consider. The old Duke was being particularly agreeable of late, and James was not entirely sure he trusted it. James had done his utmost to engage with his father and his weasel-faced attorney on the matter of the list.

He had studied it with them, made appreciative noises in all the right places, and given the vague impression that he might see Lady Penelope Colchester as something of a frontrunner in it all.

His father had immediately set up engagement after engagement with just that young lady in mind, seeming to think nothing of the feelings and sensibilities of Lady Felicia Trent, and her father, the Earl of Whittingham.

They had been swiftly swept aside as if they had never been to dine at Sandford Hall. James knew that was just the way of things when a man of his status was looking for a wife, and it would be accepted amongst all competitors that they might be easily dismissed.

And yet still he could not help thinking that it was a dreadful way to treat people. It was true that he had no particular fondness for Lady Felicia Trent and her perpetual corrections, but he was sure that she still had feelings, as any human might. Her own pride was as susceptible to wounding as anybody else's.

Of course, James knew he had his own part to play in it all by continuing in his ruse. Only now he had turned his spurious attention on Lady Penelope Colchester and, inevitably, she would be swept aside too.

He had to admit, whilst Penelope was a quiet young woman, he did not think that she would be as affected by it all as Lady Felicia might. He could not make out Penelope's true character at all, thinking that she surely could not be as agreeable in everything as she appeared.

She simply agreed with every word he said, and he found that somehow more distasteful than Lady Felicia's perpetual disagreement.

And it led him to ridicule her a little at times, saying the silliest things to see if she would disagree.

But whether or not it was in Lady Penelope's nature to wholeheartedly agree with everything he said, it did not give him the right to mock. She was no more than a pawn on a chess board, something which he himself resented when it applied to him, and he owed her a little more respect. Especially since this was all designed to keep suspicion away from his door, with no intentions at all towards Lady Penelope herself.

Still, the fact that his father continued to be agreeable was, he thought, a little disconcerting. Even when James was doing just as his father wanted, the Duke was usually still a bluff and grumbling man.

It was just in Richard Harrington's nature to be perpetually displeased with life and everything in it, and so the idea that he felt a little more fondly towards his son for acceding to his wishes on this occasion did not seem to hold water.

But James could not entirely put the pleasing change in character down to his father's suspicions either, for that did not seem to fit at all.

His father was not a man who could keep his own counsel, and if he had any suspicions surrounding James and his perpetual absences, the old Duke would surely come right out with them. He was not a man who could hide his feelings particularly well, and so James was almost confident that things were on an even keel, for the time being at least.

Only *almost*, because he could not rule out that his father was playing as much of a role as he was. Perhaps James was not the only one who felt himself to be an actor upon a stage; perhaps his father was learning a little something about the craft himself.

Still, there was currently nothing he could do about any of it. He was not far enough along in his acquaintance with Charlotte, and she was not so enamoured of Dukes and other such similar men of title that she would agree to anything. And so, he knew he must carry on as he was doing, all the while trying to further the closeness between them.

In the end, James had managed to get no sleep whatsoever. Much apart from his vague concerns about his father, his mind continually drifted to pleasing images of Charlotte with her slightly uneven, slightly sardonic smile, her beautiful blue eyes, and her slightly too-

red hair. And her confident bearing and generous curves did nothing to keep his thoughts in a straight line.

How was a man to get a moment's rest with such a beautiful creature locked inside his mind?

When it came to getting ready for the evening, a somewhat jaded James left many of the decisions to his valet. Samuel Jones, knowing his master well and having many years' experience looking after him, made all the right decisions, just as James had known he would.

The result was that James was very pleased with his appearance and allowed himself a moment or two of vanity to admire the result in the long, oval mirror.

His tailcoat, breeches, and boots, were of the deepest, most immaculate black imaginable. The tailcoat was a new one, and his tailor had cut it to perfection.

His waistcoat was new also, being crafted from a very fine material that was almost golden in colour. The effect was both striking and austere, and with his thick dark hair neatly cut, and his chin freshly shaven, Lord Harrington looked very well indeed, and he knew it.

Finally, when he was sure he looked as smart as he possibly could, he set off to meet Hector and Lawrence in the drawing room before the

evening began.

Finally, Charles Holt had seen exactly what he had been hoping for. In truth, he had seen far more than he had been hoping for, and now all that remained was to identify the lady in question.

He had, just as the Duke had demanded, hired a trustworthy driver to take him over to the east of the county.

Charles had made no bones of the fact that they were there to watch somebody, and that they must not be seen at any price. He also made it very clear that he was paying for the man's discretion as much as his driving, and that *that* payment would be very handsome indeed if the man proved to be trustworthy.

They had made their initial approach on the first day as dusk was drawing down. Charles realized it would not be a productive start, but he wanted to get a better look at Hanover Hall in the relative cover of the falling darkness.

Hanover Hall was in a beautiful, rural location, and there was very little else for miles around. Charles immediately realized that they might have some little trouble in disguising their intentions, especially when he discovered that there was only one road leading to the hall itself and that it ended there.

However, the driver very quickly proved to be worth his weight in gold, locating a patch of hard ground behind some thick foliage where the small carriage might easily be hidden.

Once Charles was satisfied that their vantage point was not overlooked by any window at the hall, he instructed the driver to take up position whilst he himself continued on foot to look more closely at the hall.

Given that anybody visiting or leaving Hanover Hall would need to pass their little vantage point, Charles knew it did not really matter if he had a firm knowledge of the land. Still, his master had given him a very important responsibility, and he was determined to execute it to the very best of his abilities.

On that first evening, once Charles had familiarized himself with the area entirely, he waited in the vantage point for no more than two hours. It was getting late, and it was clear that either Lord Harrington was staying in the hall itself for the night or he was already out, and the only thing they would glean from an extended vigil would be his return from wherever he had been.

Essentially, that would tell him nothing, and so Charles decided that they should return the following day and begin the exercise in earnest.

And what a day it had been, for James Harrington rode past them on

horseback in the early afternoon. He looked smart and well-dressed, and Charles thought it much more likely that he had been invited somewhere for afternoon tea than that he was simply going out for a ride.

Charles felt a little nervous giving Lord Harrington some headway but knew that he could not risk that sharp young man realizing he was being followed.

Still, they managed to keep him in sight and followed him to a small manor house just a few miles away. Charles was inordinately relieved that James Harrington had not determined to cut across country, for it was clear that he could have done. As fate would have it, he had kept to the main roads, and it had been an easy matter for Charles' driver to follow him.

And very likely the Duke's son had not wanted to get his smart clothes dirty by cutting through the fields. More and more, it seemed as if Charles was on the right scent; surely a man determined to keep clean by adding miles to his journey had some reason for it. Charles could not help hoping that the reason was a young lady.

After James had turned in towards the little manor, Charles realized that it would not be an easy thing to keep an eye on him from the outside. It was a rambling old Manor house with equally rambling grounds, in the style of so many quaint little places in the county.

But there was too much of interest and not enough by way of wide open spaces, with rose bushes, rhododendrons, and clematis everywhere, not to mention box hedging and laurel. From the point of view of secretly studying somebody, this manor was most unsuitable. He could not get a clear view of the old place from any angle at all.

As much as it unsettled him, Charles knew that he could not hover in the area. Instead, he instructed his driver to head back towards the village they had driven through to get there.

He would make some enquiries there and discover the name of the small estate and, therefore, its owner.

In the end, it was his driver who proved to be the most useful, once again. Charles had been viewing the village from the window of the carriage, wondering quite how he might go about finding the information he sought. After all, in such a small village, his enquiries might seem a little suspicious.

If there had been a single professional looking establishment in the place, Charles Holt would not have thought twice about entering it, but as far as he could see, it was just a small village in the same vein as many other villages; insular and unsophisticated.

It was his driver's idea to make enquiries in the local hostelry,

declaring that it was always best to find a drunk man in need of a drink when a person needed information.

Knowing that he would stand out in such a place, Charles had remained in the carriage and handed his driver some coins with which to buy himself, and hopefully their source of information, something to drink.

Charles waited anxiously in the carriage, imagining one moment how he might soon be furnishing the Duke with some excellent information and, in the next, worrying that he would discover nothing at all.

“I must say, that took rather longer than I was expecting,” Charles snapped when his driver returned more than an hour later.

“Begging your pardon, Sir, but whilst I found a suitable drinking partner almost immediately, he was not quite drunk enough in the beginning.” The driver looked chagrined in a way which made Charles puff up a little with pride.

He always liked to deal with people whom he fully considered to be beneath him, for it gave him such a sense of power. No doubt the same sense of power that the Duke felt when dealing with him.

“Well, what have you found? Was it worth the drinking money I handed you?”

“I believe so, Sir,” the driver said steadily, and it was clear to Charles that the man had barely touched a drop of liquor himself. Well, at least he had not taken advantage. “The estate is called Thurlow Manor, Sir, and it is owned by a Baron, Lord Cunningham. The man lives there with his daughter and a handful of staff.”

“I see,” Charles said, feeling success just within his grasp.

“And I am afraid that is all I was able to find out, Sir,” the driver mumbled.

“But that is very good,” Charles said, feeling suddenly magnanimous in his little victory. “No, no, you have done very well indeed.”

“Will you be heading back to Thurlow Manor now, Sir?” the driver asked.

“No, I think we will take up our position at Hanover again, my dear fellow. Perhaps it would be an idea to take note of the time the young man returns and, indeed, lay in wait should he make his way out again this evening.”

By the time Charles saw James Harrington return, it was growing dusk once again. He had clearly spent a good deal of his afternoon at Thurlow Manor, and Charles could only hope that his intention of

being there had been towards the daughter.

Unfortunately, Charles could not entirely dismiss the idea that the Duke's son had some connection to the Baron. Perhaps they were friends or had some little matter of business between them.

It would be just like James Harrington to be so complicated and exasperating. The very thought of it was beginning to annoy Charles because he could not bear the idea that there might be nothing to be found at all, that his master's suspicions might be groundless.

He knew that the Duke would, in the end, be pleased and relieved if there was no lady here in the east at all, and no complicated romantic matter to attend to. Certainly, his master would not see it as a failure on Charles's part, that was certain.

But it would disappoint Charles greatly. He wanted this. He wanted to be silently instrumental in bringing Lord Harrington's little world crashing down around his ears. And not once did it occur to him to examine his own reasons for wanting such a thing. He did not like James Harrington because he was his mother's son, a person of intelligence who knew he was intelligent, just as the Duchess had been.

Apart from the idea that his work at the Duchy might cease in years to come, Charles really had nothing more to base his hatred upon. But

Charles was not a man of reflection; he was a man of reaction, and he cared nothing for whether or not his opinion of the young man was fair. His opinion was as it was, and that was all there was to it.

Charles decided that they would wait in the cover of the vantage point to see if Lord Harrington made his way out for the evening. Although he had concluded that he had made great progress in a single day, perhaps there might be even more to be made.

However, the longer he waited, the hungrier he grew, and the hungrier he grew, the more unreasonable he became.

He silently cursed his master's son for his own lack of preparation and his own hunger, and he very nearly decided to call an end to their observations for the evening when he heard the sound of approaching hooves and carriage wheels.

Charles edged his way through the foliage, determined to get a good look at the occupants of the carriage and knowing that he would benefit from the cover of darkness as much as anything else.

He could see the Duke's son in the back of the carriage with two other men. Although it was dark, and his concentration had been fully upon James, Charles thought he could safely assume that the others were Hector and Lawrence Hanover.

Once again, he gave his driver instructions to follow them at some distance.

Chapter 12

James, Hector, and Lawrence Hanover arrived among the last of the guests at Morley Hall. Lawrence, an older and slightly more serious version of his son, did not like to stand at the back of a long queue.

The result was that whenever the three of them went anywhere together, they either arrived horribly early or slightly too late, as both approaches would result in a reduction of the crowd.

“Well, that was nice and simple,” Lawrence Hanover said with a chuckle after what he obviously saw as a most pleasingly brief greeting from Lord Morley, a man who had clearly stood at his own door for so long he was now tired of it.

“Yes, I must say that I favour your approach, Lawrence,” James said with amusement.

“It is the only way to go, my dear boy,” Lawrence replied, describing the son of the Duke of Sandford in the same terms he had always used.

Not that James minded at all, he was inordinately fond of Lawrence Hanover. How nice it would have been to have a father with a fine sense of humour, one who paid so much less attention to the things he

probably ought to have done.

“Oh look, there is Oliver Daventry,” Hector said significantly. “You have some matter to discuss with him, do you not, Father?”

“Oh yes, yes I do,” Lawrence said, successfully diverted. “Now, I am sure that the two of you will manage without me for a while.” He nodded his departure before hurrying across the ballroom.

“I must say, that was rather clumsily done, Hector,” James said and grinned at his old friend.

“Clumsy or not, my trusting parent fell for it.” Hector laughed. “In any case, he has been blithering on about Oliver Daventry all week and how he must seek him out for some reason or other. And I can hardly believe you are criticizing, my dear fellow when it was all done for your sake.”

“I know, my manners are appalling of late,” James said, his eyes scouring the room for any sign of her. “I am, of course, grateful.” He bowed dramatically.

“Oh, how very kind,” Hector said with friendly sarcasm. “Anyway, is there any sign of your quarry?”

“*Quarry?* You make me sound like quite the predator.” James was

grinning.

“And are you not?”

“No, I am not,” James went on. “Charlotte Cunningham is by no means the sort of woman one might consider prey. She is far too quick and clever to be such.”

“My dear fellow, she really has opened up your chest and climbed inside, has she not?”

“As indelicate as the phrasing is, Hector, yes, I believe you are right. She has.” The moment he set eyes on her, his whole demeanor changed.

He felt suddenly taut from head to foot, every fibre of his being seeming to reach for her across the room.

“I say, Charlotte *does* look well this evening,” Hector said appreciatively.

And Hector was right; Charlotte looked truly beautiful. She was wearing a very well-fitting gown in a shade of blue that was so dark it reminded him of the midnight sky.

It suited her pale complexion very well, and he could see her chestnut

hair, thick and expertly twisted up at the back of her head, gleaming under the light of the chandeliers.

The long white gloves which finished just above the elbow were immaculate, and the skin of her upper arms exposed between them and the short, puffed sleeves of her gown, looked soft and delicious.

“And since you seem to have lost the power of speech, my poor dear boy, I am bound to tell you that her father is deep in conversation with Lord Morley seemingly. So, perhaps you will get your chance of some quiet conversation with her if you make haste.”

Hector was staring at him, his eyebrows raised. “Well, what are you waiting for? Get over there. Leave me to it; I shall be perfectly alright. In fact, if I see Lucas Cunningham breaking away from Lord Morley, I shall see to it that he has the perfect distraction in me.”

“You really are a dear friend, Hector,” James said, and it was the most sensible and serious comment that had passed between the two of them in years.

Before he was halfway to her, James could see that Charlotte had already spied him and was staring intently. There was that little lift in her smile, that beautifully sardonic tilt, and he felt his longing for her grow with every step.

“I see you are in cahoots with my cousin,” was her greeting, and she smiled broadly.

James was certain that she had cast an eye over his appearance appreciatively, and he found he rather enjoyed it. He was glad that his valet was an attentive man, even if he had not been so himself that evening.

“In cahoots?” James said with amusing innocence.

“Yes, I could see you both looking over here in your little conversation. No doubt Hector is to intervene if my father finds himself suddenly in want of a conversational partner.” It was not a question but a statement, something which she clearly knew for a fact.

“I cannot tell if you are pleased or displeased by my little plans.”

“No, I cannot tell either, so that makes two of us.” She laughed lightly, and he closed his eyes for a moment to enjoy the beautiful melody of it.

“Tell me, do you think you will always play with me as a cat plays with a mouse, Charlotte?”

“I am not so cruel as a cat, James. I just like to amuse myself on occasion. I daresay I have been very carelessly brought up.”

“And I find myself very glad of that. It is my opinion that your father did a very fine job.”

“I shall pass on your kind words.”

“Indeed, but would you mind awfully passing them on later? I would not like to waste a minute since I do not know how many we shall get alone this evening.”

“Quite so,” she said, and he was pleased to see that she did not look as upended as she had done when he had previously attempted to show her just a little taste of the passion that was raging within him.

She did not look cornered as she had done first time. No doubt she had mastered her emotions in that regard; she had evolved. But he would have expected nothing less of Charlotte Cunningham, a woman as bold and as clever as she did not quiver for long.

“I wonder if you would care for a little fresh air? It is a little stifling in here this evening, is it not?” he said hopefully, wondering if there really would be a chance for them to slip away from everybody’s gaze for just a few minutes.

“It is perfectly cool and comfortable in here, James,” she said with an amused smile. “But yes, a little fresh air would be nice,” she added,

and there was something in her eyes that told him most exactly that she understood his meaning, his need to be alone with her for just a while. “But perhaps I should go first, so as not to incite comment.”

“Very well,” he said, feeling suddenly excited and unable to find anything more than that to say.

He watched as she left, quietly picking her way through the crowd without drawing a moment’s attention to herself. He noted that she turned right as she left the ballroom, away from the main entrance.

Concerned that he might not discover the place from which she made her exit, given that he had never been to the home of Lord Morley before, he quickly, and as unobtrusively as possible, made his way out of the ballroom also.

She had disappeared from sight, and he was forced to try three doors before he entered a room where he felt a cool evening breeze.

He squinted into the darkness and could see that the French windows had been left ajar. He hurried through and peered out, his heart pounding a little harder as he spied her standing in the corner of the terrace in the moonlight.

He made his way out, pulling the door up behind him, and hurried across the terrace to join her.

As she turned to face him, he was suddenly incapable of any thought at all. He could think of nothing to say, no amusing little conversation to start between them. All he knew was that he wanted to reach for her, to touch the soft skin of her upper arm and pull her to him.

In the end, he did just that. Without a word, he gently laid his hands on her arms and was transported to realize that they were even softer in the flesh than he had imagined. She looked back at him with the faintest of smiles on her face, showing no sign of the fear that he was sure he had seen in her father's drawing room just weeks before.

Could it be true that she wanted him as he wanted her? Unable to speak and unable to wait another moment, he moved forward, drawing her slightly towards him as he did so, and kissed her gently on the lips.

It was a single kiss; it was over in no time at all, and it had been wonderful. Although she did not speak, Charlotte had not pulled away from him. She was looking into his eyes in the moonlight as he was looking into hers, and he knew he had not misjudged her feelings for him.

Once again, he kissed her, and this time she responded in a way that made him want to lose himself entirely, forget where he was altogether.

When the kiss was over, Charlotte drew back just a little. But it was not to repel him, he knew.

“And now I must go back inside,” she said, her voice low and smooth. “Before anybody realizes I am gone.”

“I will give it some minutes before I return,” he said hoarsely.

She smiled at him before turning to leave, and he knew that they had truly reached a further understanding in their relationship.

This time, the journey was a little longer than it had been to Thurlow Manor, and they quickly found themselves on the edge of a great estate which Charles Holt knew must be that of the Earl of Morley.

Charles made the driver continue past the entrance of the estate and draw in a little way down the road and out of sight. There was no way he could possibly drive right into the place for a better look, even though more than one carriage had turned down the great driveway.

“So, an evening at a fine ball for him to enjoy!” Charles said to himself through clenched teeth.

Once again, he was swayed by his envy, and it took him a moment or two to overcome it for long enough to think what he should do next.

In the end, he decided he would have to approach on foot and under cover of darkness. Whilst the driveway through the Morley estate was well lit with torches for most of its length, it was also flanked by woodland on both sides, perfect camouflage for the irritated and hungry attorney.

It had occurred to him to send his driver out instead, but he knew that if there was anything to be seen, he must see it with his own eyes. Of course, tonight's event being a ball, it was unlikely that he would see very much at all.

However dark it was, Charles knew that he could not simply make his way right up to the building and peer in through the windows. He would be bound to be spotted by a member of the household staff, and if some commotion came about, James Harrington himself might even see and recognize him.

No, he did not think he could expect much of the same success he had already achieved, but he was there to do a job, and he would do it.

He waited in the carriage for another half an hour until there appeared a break in the constant stream of arriving guests. It was getting late, and no doubt the event itself was well underway.

As Charles picked his way through the woodland, his path lit by only

the moon and the pale light coming from the torches on the driveway, he quietly cursed his master. Charles had certain ideas of himself and grubbing about through woodland in the dark did not fit with them at all.

However much he might have wanted to upend James Harrington, he did not want to do so at the cost of his self-esteem. To Charles, his self-esteem was *all*.

But, by the time he had made his way through the woods, reaching their edge, he cheered up again. He had made it through without falling over or otherwise disarranging himself, and he had certainly picked the right side of the drive to sneak through, for it afforded him a very fine view of the hall and, more importantly, the brightly lit windows of what he now could see was a ballroom.

The windows of the hall were very grand indeed, being tall, narrow, and arched. He could see the guests inside perambulating, secretly studying one another, and occasionally dancing.

It was always the way with the upper classes, they could not attend an event for the sake of it; there was always a statement to be made, an advantage to be taken, and it struck Charles that they studied each other like two dogs preparing to fight, each of them weighing up the opposition.

As good as his view was, he could see no sign of the Duke's son. After a further twenty minutes and adding a little cold now to his extreme hunger, Charles began to grow frustrated once more. He had been about to give up and make his way back through the woods when a little movement at the side of the hall caught his eye.

He continued west through the woods, sticking to the edge, heading away from the ballroom. He squinted in the moonlight and suddenly made out, quite clearly, a young woman coming out through the French windows and walking to the corner of a little terrace.

Although he could not see her face clearly, he could see enough of her to know that she was rather a well-made young lady. She wore a dark gown and very white long gloves that suited her perfectly, and he thought he quite liked the look of her.

But just minutes into his silent study of her, another figure came out through the French windows, gently closing them behind him. The man was tall and broad and instantly recognizable as Lord James Harrington.

All of Charles' senses were suddenly heightened, and he strained to listen in case any conversation they had between them might make its way to his ears. When he heard nothing, he began to feel a little disappointed, until he realized that they were not speaking at all. They were simply looking at each other, staring right at one another,

and Charles was certain that his success was about to be complete.

James walked up to the young woman and reached for her, holding her upper arms and staring at her wordlessly. And the young woman, for her part, did not seem at all dismayed by his brazen behaviour.

And so it was, with his breath held tightly in his chest, that Charles Holt witnessed the son of the Duke of Sandford kissing the unknown woman.

It had been so brief that Charles could have forgiven himself for thinking that he might have imagined it. But after a moment in which the two young people stood staring at one another once again, James Harrington pulled the lady closer to him and kissed her again, this time for a little longer.

When the two of them finally separated, the young lady spoke but, as predicted, Charles could not make out what she was saying. She made her way back into the hall, leaving James standing outside on the terrace alone.

Where Charles had once thought the young lady very pleasing indeed, her appreciation of James Harrington had instantly turned him against her.

She was no longer pleasing, not to Charles. He thought her altogether

too confident in herself. He was sure he could see it in her walk, the way she held herself upright as she glided in through the French windows.

Of course, had she not allowed Lord Harrington to kiss her, had she not been so very clearly moved by the young man, Charles Holt would not have seen any of the things he imagined he saw.

But Charles Holt was not going to waste any time on reflection. He would simply find out who she was and report back to his master.

He waited in the woods a little longer, staring at James and feeling very, very pleased with himself. James, who had watched his young lady depart, still stared vaguely at the door as if in hopes that she would return.

The young man ran both hands through his thick, dark hair and seemed to blow out a great puff of air into the moonlit night. Oh yes, James Harrington certainly had a secret. Not only that, but there was something in his demeanour, his movements, which told Charles most exactly that he was in love with that young lady.

As Charles turned to make his way back through the woods, it was in very much better humour this time than when he had entered it. One way or another, James Harrington's world was about to change, and not for the better.

Chapter 13

When the Duke came to James in the drawing room where he had been taking some tea and reading a book, he looked up with surprise.

His father really only went into the drawing room if he had a guest or was entertaining a group of guests before dinner, and James could certainly never remember a time when his father had come in for afternoon tea.

“Forgive me; I had only asked for one cup and saucer, Father,” James said, trying to be polite but heartily hoping that his father would not choose to join him.

“No, no matter, my dear boy,” he said brightly and smiled at him in a way that was not exactly warm, but certainly not very far from it.

Once again, James was assailed with the feeling that he ought not to trust this new calm and seeming understanding between them. It had never existed before, at least not for long at any rate, and it all felt rather foreign to him.

Beneath the strangeness, James could not help wondering how life might be if he and his father really did begin to get along with one another. It had certainly been a very welcome, if somewhat radical,

departure to have spent the last weeks at Sandford Hall without his father growing red-faced and bellowing over some minor matter or other. And he had not once lost his patience, at least not ostensibly, with James at all.

Perhaps this was the wind of change. Perhaps there was a tide turning between them, and they might finally come to get along better as father and son.

“If you are sure,” James said again a little uncertainly.

“Quite sure, James. It is not long until dinner, and I shall take some sherry beforehand, so I shall survive.” He laughed lightly, and James really did begin to feel unsettled.

His father did not make small talk, nor did he laugh in genuine amusement. The Duke of Sandford only ever laughed when he was presiding over some victory or other in life, generally something that was not at all amusing.

“I have been out with the overseer this morning, Father,” James said, doing his best to strike up some conversation although, in truth, he hardly knew where to begin.

He and his father had behaved a certain way for so long that it was a hard habit to break. James knew that ordinarily, had his father come

into the drawing room in such circumstances, he would undoubtedly have found something clever and amusing to say, something a little sarcastic that would have seen the old Duke grumbling and complaining, his blue eyes staring fiercely, and his complexion reddening further still.

“Indeed?” his father said with a look of genuine interest. “Anything to report?”

“No, just a quick inspection of the tenant farms, and everything was in order.”

“Good, very good.”

“And there is nothing outstanding particularly to be dealt with until next week. We have a clear few days, Father.” James laughed although it felt tight and unnatural.

The fact of the matter was that he was about to announce his departure for Hanover Hall once again, something that was becoming harder and harder to do without looking guilty.

“Good, very good,” his father said again. “Because I have much arranged for us for the next few days, and it would be nice to have a clear run at it.”

“Much arranged?” James said and could hear his own disappointment very clearly.

His father had headed him off at the pass, and before he had even a chance to express a wish to head east again, James had been entirely thwarted.

“Yes, you and I are expected for dinner at Paynton Hall tomorrow evening. The Earl has asked us to dine with him and the countess and, of course, Lady Penelope.”

“Lady Penelope,” James said flatly.

“You are still keen on the young lady, are you not?” The Duke raised his eyebrows significantly. “Unless you have changed your mind and decided you prefer Lady Felicia after all.”

“No, no, not at all,” James said, wishing that he had never met either woman in his life.

“And then we are at a garden party with Lord Harker the following day. I must admit, I am not particularly fond of Harker, but Lord Paynton and Penelope will be there once again, so I think it is a very good opportunity. I have already accepted the invitation on your behalf, James.” The Duke smiled, and James returned it, despite every instinct telling him to fight back.

But things had changed, and it was no longer a simple case of talking to his father with the humorously sarcastic confidence of the past. There was more to think about now, a longer game to play.

If he argued now, he risked exposing himself, exposing the life he was trying to protect in the east of the county. Even though they had kissed, he knew that he could not simply propose immediately. Charlotte was attracted to him now, of that there was no doubt, but that did not mean that she was yet in love with him as he was in love with her.

It all seemed too sensitive at the moment, still too new and untested for him to blunder in and ask for her hand. He just could not risk turning her away from him, not at this stage.

But he had not seen her since the night they had kissed, and his mind had been full of her, more so than ever. He had been looking forward to the next few days heartily, counting the hours until he could be away from Sandford and back over at Hanover Hall, eagerly awaiting his next audience with the most beautiful woman in the world.

It seemed to James as if he was walking on the edge of the knife currently, not wanting to tread too heavily in one direction or another for fear of cutting himself, slicing right through all his hopes.

He knew that he would have to accede to his father's request this time, however much it pained him. He would have to play this game a little longer or risk losing the only person he could not bear to lose.

James finished his tea in as calm and friendly manner as he could manage. He did not want his father to see his disappointment, to suspect him of something. And he did not want him to see through to his true feelings for Lady Penelope Colchester, or *lack* thereof.

No, he would simply have to write another very disappointing letter to Charlotte and hope that she would be as forgiving and understanding on this occasion as she had been on the last.

When he finally managed to excuse himself from his father's company, James felt a sweeping sense of relief. By the time he reached his own chamber, he was able to rant and rail to himself, to let out all that he had held deep inside in the Duke's presence. He was able to be himself again.

Once his angry protestations were over, he made his way immediately to his writing bureau, snatched up his pen, and dipped it into the ink.

"My Dear Charlotte,

It is with the deepest regret that I, once again, cannot make my way to Hanover Hall. My father has, as he did before, arranged a number of

engagements at which my own presence is required and has, once again, neglected to give me a great deal of notice of the fact.

Please believe me when I tell you that I would truly much rather be over in the east, hovering about Thurlow Manor as I wait for a moment alone with you. But alas I cannot, and I am afraid that I shall have to forego the obvious pleasure that your company always brings me.

I hope you will not be too disappointed by my absence, although I am bound to say that I should feel pleased if I thought that you missed me.

I know that I shall miss you, especially after Lord Morley's ball. What a wonderful night that was, my dear Charlotte, and I am bound to say that it has played upon my mind ever since.

But still, I shall not commit too much to paper, and simply say that I shall write to you very soon with the details of my next visit to the east. And I am bound to tell you that, next time, wild horses will not keep me away.

Until I set eyes on you again, be assured that you will be constantly in my thoughts.

With fondest regards,

James."

For all the world, James had wanted to end his letter *with all my love* but knew that he must restrain himself a little, not get ahead of himself in any way. After all, it was enough that he had alluded to the kiss without foolishly declaring his love for her on paper.

When the time was right, he would do it in person. He would take that beautiful woman into his arms, tell her how he had fallen so deeply in love with her, and ask her to marry him.

He could only hope that day would come sooner rather than later, for he did not know how much longer he could keep his father and the endless stream of entirely uninteresting young women at bay.

Sooner or later, there would have to be a reckoning. The Duke of Sandford was not going to get his way and, furthermore, he was not going to like it.

James folded the letter and sealed it, sighing deeply as he realized it would be some weeks before he would see Charlotte again. He had missed her enough already and had been wondering how he would even make it through the next few days as it was. To have that time extended seemed somehow cruel and perverse to him. He wanted to be with her, to talk with her and spar with her in that way that was drawing him ever closer to her each time they met.

And he wanted to kiss her. He wanted to hold her in his arms and kiss

those soft, warm lips once again. He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, remembering with absolute clarity the very moment he had first touched the soft skin of her upper arms.

He had never felt skin so smooth in his life, and it had taken every drop of will he had not to pull her tight to him, not to feel her body against his own.

In the end, however, the two kisses they had shared had been enough to pacify his longing. He had felt so close to her at that moment, and the idea that she was coming to feel something of the same for him had kept him alive with excitement ever since.

Well, he knew that Charlotte Cunningham was worth every sacrifice he would have to make, even if, on this occasion, that sacrifice would be the lack of her company.

He just had to hold on, to have patience, and find the right time to propose to her.

Chapter 14

Charles Holt could tell by the Duke's tone of voice that he was about to be sent back over to the east of the county. He relished the thought of continuing what he had begun, anything to make James Harrington's defeat solid and undeniable.

The Duke had been extraordinarily pleased with Charles for discovering the identity of the lady in question so quickly.

It had taken no more than a little observation in the area of Thurlow Manor to discover that the Honourable Miss Charlotte Cunningham was, indeed, the mystery woman who had been kissed by the Duke's son on the terrace in the moonlight.

Charles knew that he would earn very well that month, for the Duke of Sandford always knew which services were best paid for. And when he had decided to send the attorney back to make further enquiries, Charles could not have been better pleased if he tried.

"Yes, I am afraid I am going to need you to return, Holt. As I said to you before, now that we have the identity of the young lady, I think there is more work to be done. Now that I know there is nothing like the fortune I would expect in terms of a dowry, the union is, of course, impossible. Not only impossible but reprehensible."

“Of course, Your Grace,” he said, standing with his hands clasped behind his back in front of his master’s desk once again.

“On this occasion, you will not need to follow my son. As a matter of fact, I have thwarted his little attempts to get over to Hanover Hall this time, and so you do not have the risk of discovery in that quarter.” The Duke laughed mercilessly. “That boy really does think he has the best of me, but he does not. I could see through his ridiculous attempt to cover his disappointment. He has no art for this sort of deception at all, Holt,” the Duke went on as if he were talking to a friend, confiding almost.

Charles rather liked those times, those brief moments where he felt as if he were his master’s equal. Still, he knew better than to agree with him, and on this occasion, Charles remained respectfully silent.

“I do not wish you to follow the young lady either unless you suddenly see a reason for it. No, what I want you to do this time is very different.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Charles could already feel a little excitement beginning to build.

As he stood with his head tipped reverentially to one side, Charles felt a flash of pride when he realized that it was *his* efforts and his efforts

alone which had brought all of this about.

Had it not been for him, the Duke would have nothing but his suspicions. But now he had proof, and he was trusting his attorney to delve deeper.

“The problem is, you will have to work quickly. From what you say, it appears the two are very close already, and I do not want to find myself in the position of having the young lady presented to me as my son’s fiancée. That would be very awkward, very awkward indeed.” He shook his head and winced as he thought of it. “So, what I need from you is very simple, though I daresay it will not be simply achieved. I need some leverage over my son; I need to be certain that I hold all the cards in this little game that he and I are playing.”

“Quite so, Your Grace.”

“I need you to make some enquiries, to find out if there is anything about the young lady that I can hold against her. More importantly, I want something that will turn my son away from her or otherwise make it impossible for the two of them to marry. In truth, I do not care what it is; any little scandal will do. Just find out the very worst you can, Holt. At the end of the day, we all have secrets, every single one of us.”

As the Duke finished speaking, Charles absently wondered if he

himself had any secrets. He did not think he did, although he was sure there would be certain aspects of his personality that he would not like to become common knowledge.

“Take as long as you need, my dear fellow.” The Duke had become conversational again, almost amiable. “And you would probably do well to employ the same driver that you used last time. From what you say, he appears to have come in rather useful. Discretion is worth every penny you pay him, so pay him well.”

“Yes, Your Grace. The man is rather bright for one of his class,” Charles said, pleased for the opportunity to elevate himself above somebody, even if the poor man was not in the room.

“Well, if your work looks set to keep you away in the east for any length of time, you must write to me every few days with your progress. Other than that, I shall expect your report when you return.”

“Very well, Your Grace,” Charles said and bowed deeply, recognizing the dismissal as always.

It was a simple thing for Charles to employ the same driver again, the man clearly remembering how well he was paid last time.

What Charles found most comforting was the fact that the driver never asked a single question. Even with the lower classes, when there

was some intrigue afoot, they could not help enquiring as a rule.

But not this man, he simply drove the carriage, spoke when he was spoken to, and kept Charles Holt's business to himself. Not to mention the fact that he could be tasked with finding out a little information here and there along the way.

After all, he really had proved very useful the last time when he had managed to wrest information from an old drunk in the village hostelry.

Charles found he quite enjoyed the journey across from west to east, feeling himself a little freer than he ordinarily did. He was very pleased with himself, of course, that he had managed to work for the Duchy of Sandford for so many years, enjoying such elevated status in the county.

But there was something about this situation that was very different. For once, Charles was in charge; Charles was the master.

It was different from being at home and ordering his housekeeper around. No end of men of his station had a housekeeper; there was nothing so very grand in that. Of course, many men of his station had drivers, but this was different. Charles truly felt like the master this time, the master in every sense.

Perhaps it was because he was not acting on the Duke's instructions precisely, but rather that he had been given free rein to have the details be whatever he chose them to be.

Whatever it was, Charles was enjoying it.

When they arrived in the area between Hanover Hall and Thurlow Manor, a few general enquiries led them to a coaching inn on the edge of a large village called Belton. The inn was very well appointed given its location, and Charles was pleased with the rooms he had taken for himself.

Charles allowed himself a day to settle in, eating well and relaxing. It was not until he reached the start of the second day that he wondered quite where he was going to begin.

He had thought at first that he would ingratiate himself to another attorney in the area, one professional man to another, but that had been his own arrogance rising to the fore, assuming that he would easily work his way into things in such a manner.

But now that he had slept on it, had overcome his excitement and feelings of superiority, the cold light of day was beginning to peek through the dark shutters of his mind.

Although Belton was a much bigger village than the last one, a place

where he had already spotted a number of professional establishments, surely he would still stand out.

A professional man of sense would not simply part with information, what on earth had he been thinking? Even Charles, a man of dubious character, would not have treated a stranger making enquiries with such alacrity.

He would not invite him in and tell him everything, at least not until he had fully ascertained what gain there could be for him in all of it.

No, he thought he would very likely have to find some other method, perhaps even go back to the hostelry in the other little village.

Charles' nerves began to desert him as he wondered exactly how much information the drunkard would be able to give them. He would hardly be privy to the inner workings of Thurlow Manor, much less the private information of Miss Charlotte Cunningham.

In the end, it was his driver who, once again, managed to save the day. Not, of course, that the driver would be getting credit at all in any message Charles sent back to the Duke.

Whilst Charles had been wallowing in his own fears in his well-appointed rooms in the coaching inn, his driver, whose room was a very far cry from that of his temporary master, had been spending

time talking to people at the inn.

He particularly singled out locals, people who lived in the area and regularly drank in that establishment rather than travellers on their way to somewhere else, simply passing through.

On the day that Charles had spent relaxing, the driver had discovered that Lord Cunningham's own driver, a man who had served him for many years, was also a man who occasionally found himself in the grip of liquor.

"It was the landlord of the inn who told me, Sir," the driver said, trying to disguise the pride in his own cleverness, although not very well. "He was having a quiet day, so I bought a few drinks, and he was happy to talk. Anyway, we got to talking about the more notable people in the area, and it would seem that the Baron is one of them."

"I do hope you did not make yourself too obvious," Charles snapped, pleased that some progress had been made but unreasonably displeased that it had not been Charles himself who had made it.

"Oh no, Sir, I was very careful about that. I just laughed and said that the Baron ought to get rid of a man if he was a drunk, that there were plenty of other drivers out there like me who know when to stop."

"I see," Charles said and realized he was being petty. "Very good, very

good indeed. Go on.”

“Anyway, it seems that the Baron has something of a soft heart, Sir, and the driver has worked with him for years. He keeps the man on even though he knows it would be better to dismiss him.”

“And so, are we to expect this driver from Thurlow Manor to come into this coaching inn any time in the near future?”

“That is what I have come to tell you, Sir. He has already been in. Last night, in fact, but it was too late for me to come and knock at your door for I did not wish to wake you.”

“Good heavens, then you have spoken to this driver? Have you found something out? Come along, tell me at once,” Charles said, suddenly excited again and extremely relieved.

He could not escape the feeling that his driver had rescued him from certain humiliation, and his old confidence began to return.

“I don’t know how it helps, Sir, or if it helps at all, but the Baron’s driver was quite a talker, especially once the drink was in. Anyway, the worse he got, the more he began to talk about a young woman who works on the Thurlow estate. A maid, or a lady’s maid, by the name of Ruth Clarkin.”

“A maid? What on earth could there be of any use in that?” Charles said, wondering if he was about to have all his hopes dashed.

“Well Sir, the driver seemed a little put out by her. He said that she is a woman who is above her station, but not because she put herself there.”

“So?”

“He said that she arrived at Thurlow Manor quite out of the blue when she was a girl of just eleven years. She was employed as a maid, but she did not go through the usual training, nor did she ever have to work in the house doing the menial tasks. She went straight to the very top, so to speak.”

“I see,” Charles said, although he really did not see at all.

All he had was an idea that this was interesting somehow, especially since his driver looked pleased with the discovery.

“It’s the only thing that the driver seems to be disappointed in his master over, this girl. I think he’s a bit jealous, Sir, given that it took him many years to get his position. I think he is more disgruntled by the girl herself, though. He does not like the way she goes everywhere with her mistress as if she was her friend rather than her servant. So, I bought him another drink, and then another, and he kept repeating

that the girl ought to go back to where she had come from. And it got me thinking, Sir, could there be something in it? Could there be some scandal there that would help?"

"I think you could be right; perhaps there is." Charles had begun to see a world of possibilities opening up before his very eyes, and his excitement returned with full force. "Did you find out anything else about the young woman?"

"Yes, Sir," the driver said, and it was clear that he had relaxed now that he could see that Charles was pleased with him. "She was raised in a village called Hollerton. And Hollerton, Sir, is that little village where we stopped in on our first visit. And apparently, the Clarkin family still live there."

"Do they indeed?"

"And not only do they live there, Sir, but the driver reckons that they have hardly seen their daughter in the years since she started working at Thurlow Manor. It might be because she has ideas above her station now, but couldn't it be something else, Sir?"

"It most certainly could, my dear fellow," Charles said with relish. "Whatever the reason, this Ruth Clarkin certainly warrants further investigation."

With the doom and gloom of the last hours completely lifted, Charles could hardly wait for the day to begin.

Chapter 15

“Are you alright, Miss? These last days you have looked so sad,” Ruth said as she brushed her mistress’ beautifully thick and shiny chestnut hair. “Is it him? Is it Lord Harrington?”

“It is, Ruth. You know, I begin to wish that I had trusted my initial instincts and stayed away from that man.”

“But why? Surely you cannot mean that. He lives so far away, and he has such responsibilities. Is it not natural that he would have to break an engagement or two along the way? After all, from what you tell me, his father sounds very demanding.”

“I know, my dear Ruth. I know I ought to see it that way, but my heart is troubled.”

“But do you really feel there is a reason to mistrust him?” Ruth said gently.

“I do not think there is, but I have the most dreadful feeling that things are not right. After all, this is the second letter of its kind I have received, and it almost mirrors the first. If you remember, the first time he was unable to make it, James wrote me a letter to tell me the same thing; that his father had arranged some engagements at which

he would be expected to be present but had neglected to tell him of it until it was too late. I dismissed my concerns the first time, but this time I cannot.”

“But perhaps his father really is so capricious, Miss. And if he is, then it would be perfectly understandable that Lord Harrington would be forced to write essentially the same letter twice.”

“Oh Ruth, thank heavens for you. My mind has been racing and making up stories for me to torment myself with. I wish I had spoken to you about it sooner.” Charlotte turned on the dressing table stool and reached for her maid’s hand. “What would I do without you?”

“I wish you had spoken to me about it sooner too, for then you might not have suffered these last days.” Ruth gave a very warm and appealing chuckle.

It was true; Ruth had made Charlotte feel better. She had not cured her mind of worry altogether, much less her heart of missing her handsome, green-eyed sparring partner.

“I think it is my own vulnerability which is making me worry, Ruth.”

“How so?”

“I know now that I feel so very strongly for him, you see. Ruth, it has

been creeping up and creeping up, but that night at Lord Morley's ball when he, when he ..."

"He kissed you?" Ruth said in a whisper, her eyes lighting up with the excitement of it all.

"Yes, when he kissed me, I just *knew*. In fact, I knew just before. When I walked out onto the terrace in the moonlight and waited for him, I knew that I wanted him to kiss me. But it all seems so very sudden, does it not? Although our acquaintanceship has gone on for some months, our meetings have been sporadic and few. That is what makes me feel so very vulnerable, the fact that I have such strong feelings, such undeniable emotion, for a man I still wonder if I truly know. And if I continue to get to know him, how much deeper will I fall? How much more vulnerable will I become?"

"Is that not how it is supposed to be, Miss? When we truly fall in love, are we not *supposed* to be vulnerable? Men and women alike? Is it not the whole point of it, the trust you have in another to protect you in your vulnerability and not make it into some advantage?"

"It is the last part which scares me, Ruth."

"You still mistrust him. You still believe what you believed in the beginning about his status as a Duke-in-waiting? About his privilege?"

“As I come to know him, I believe that less and less. But in his absence, I am afraid that the thought comes back to me. What if I was simply a challenge to be conquered? I know I have a sharpness to my wit that not all men appreciate, and perhaps this is his way of triumphing.”

“You mean that because you were not a simple target, he has seen it as a mission of sorts to turn your affections towards him?”

“Exactly that. And would the culmination of that triumph not be a kiss in the moonlight?”

“You cannot think his actions so cynical, surely. I have seen how he looks at you, and I cannot think him anything other than sincere in his motives. And think of all the effort he goes to in getting here time after time. It is not an easy journey from the west to the east, and yet he makes it as often as he can.”

“But he has means and time in which to do that, does he not? He is a very determined young man, Ruth, and I do not yet know if that determination extends to winning. If it does, then I am afraid that I have been conquered.”

“You have not been conquered, you have simply been kissed,” Ruth said with a laugh. “And I truly think that you have allowed the fact that you are missing him to play upon your concerns and make them

bigger than they are. I am certain that he feels for you what you feel for him, absolutely certain. He is true; I am sure of it. I look at him, and he strikes me as a man who is falling in love. And I wish I had some way of explaining it, a list of points that I could give to you to ease your mind, but I cannot.”

“Ruth, you are the most sensible person I know, so perhaps I ought to listen. Perhaps I just ought to wait and look forward to his next letter, the one telling me that he will be returning soon.”

“And I am sure that you will receive that letter very soon, just you wait and see.”

“Thank you, Ruth.” Charlotte rose to her feet and threw her arms around her maid’s neck, holding her tightly.

“This will all work out, I am sure of it,” Ruth murmured and returned her mistress’ embrace.

Chapter 16

Charles Holt had to admit that he felt very much more conspicuous in the little village of Hollerton than he did in the somewhat more sophisticated village of Belton.

Still, needs must, and he had installed himself at the hostelry he had avoided on his last visit whilst he waited for his driver to make some preliminary enquiries.

As he spooned down what was essentially some sort of inedible stew made of turnips, Charles congratulated himself on having been clever enough to employ a most superior driver.

The man had proved very helpful indeed, not to mention discreet, and Charles thought him to have a very welcome sort of wile about him.

He had decided to send the driver on ahead so as not to immediately intimidate the Clarkin family. Much better any request for them to speak to an attorney, especially when they were unlikely to have ever employed the services of one in their lives, come from somebody of their own station in life.

Charles' self-satisfaction and delusions of grandeur had most certainly come back to him, and he was feeling very clever indeed. The fact that

his successes to date had been due entirely to his driver was not something that he was going to contemplate for long.

The accolades would be all his, not to mention the satisfaction of bringing down a most flippant and self-assured young man as James Harrington.

As he peered down into the watery stew, occasionally prodding at a floating piece of turnip with a spoon he was not entirely sure was clean, Charles grimaced. The less time he spent in the village of Hollerton, the better he would like it.

Still, whatever he discovered he might keep to himself for a day or two whilst he enjoyed a little further relaxation in the fine rooms at the coaching inn at Belton. Unless, of course, he managed to discover something of such great import he would feel compelled to leave immediately.

Just as he had decided to give up on the appalling stew altogether, his driver returned with something of a bright expression on his face. The expression alone gave Charles the highest hopes the Clarkin family had agreed to meet with him.

“Well?” he said as he dropped the spoon down into the bowl and pushed it away from him across the table. “What news?”

“They have agreed to meet with you, Sir,” the driver said triumphantly. “Or at least the husband has. The wife is a different matter; there is a nervousness about her.” The driver was smiling wickedly. “Which I reckon means there’s a secret in there somewhere.”

“Very good,” Charles said in a most satisfied manner. “And where am I to meet them?”

“They are home, Sir, and expecting you to call upon them within the hour.”

“Very well, then I shall waste no time.”

“They are expecting me to come back with you, Sir, if you have no objections,” the driver said, and Charles wondered if that was the truth or if the man was just intent on hearing the rest, his curiosity having got the better of him.

“Well, why not?” He rose to his feet, his chair scraping noisily against the cold grey flagstones. “Lead the way.”

The moment he was outside the Clarkin residence, Charles thought he could already see why it might be that a young woman who had spent so many years at Thurlow Manor might very well not be a frequent visitor to her old family home. As far as he could see, it was little

more than a hovel.

Of course, it was nothing of the kind. The Clarkin home was simply a small worker's cottage, neat and reasonably clean, certainly not wealthy, but not entirely impoverished either.

But Charles Holt always had an unnecessarily strident reaction to such things, thinking that he would rather die than find himself in a position any lower than his own.

"Come in, Sir," said a nervous woman in her middle fifties as she opened the door cautiously.

If she was Ruth Clarkin's mother, she was certainly a good deal older than Charles had been expecting. From all that had been gleaned from the Baron's drunken driver, Ruth Clarkin was just eighteen years old.

He had expected the mother to be no more than early forties at the oldest, and already his suspicions were beginning to rise.

"Thank you, my dear woman, and how kind of you to see me at such short notice," Charles said grandly and strode past her into the little room that opened out from the doorway.

There was no porch, no entrance hall of any kind, just a door from the street that led straight into the living quarters. Charles refrained from

shuddering, although he hoped that his business would be concluded sooner rather than later.

Good afternoon, Sir,” said a man of around the same age who, when he rose to his full height from the chair he had been sitting on, was almost a foot taller than Charles.

He was the same age as the woman but looked fit and vital enough for his years. “I am John Clarkin, and this is my wife, Hetty. What is it that we can do for you, Mr Holt?”

“I appreciate that my appearance is rather sudden, Mr Clarkin, but I have some questions I wish to ask you about your daughter.”

“Jane? Why? What would you want to know about Jane, Sir?” The woman said nervously.

“You have more than one daughter then, Madam? For I was truly referring to Ruth.”

Charles was looking at John Clarkin and could see a little flash of relief in his expression. Was it possible that they favoured one daughter over the other? If that were the case, perhaps it would be easier to find out something of Ruth than he thought.

“Oh, I see,” John Clarkin said and had gone from looking relieved to

looking a little shifty.

His wife, on the other hand, looked afraid. His driver had been right; there was a secret in this house.

“Your daughter Jane is married, I presume?” Charles said conversationally. “Or does she live here with you still?”

“Oh no, bless me, Jane has been gone for years. She has children of her own now, a boy of nine and a girl of eleven,” Hetty Clarkin said with pride.

“Then Jane is a good bit older than Ruth, is she not?” Charles said, and Hetty looked suddenly as if she had fallen into a trap of her own making.

“Yes, there was a good space of time between them, Sir,” she said, but her face flushed scarlet, and Charles knew that she was lying.

“Before I continue in my questioning, Mr and Mrs Clarkin, I perhaps ought to tell you that I have not come empty-handed,” he said and removed a well-stuffed velvet purse from his pocket.

John Clarkin’s eyes immediately lit up, and Charles knew there was certainly a negotiation to be had. However, when he peered at the wife, he envisaged a little resistance.

“I don’t know what you think we can tell you, Sir,” Hetty said, her cheeks still blazing with discomfort.

“I’ll deal with this, Hetty.” John Clarkin stepped in a little aggressively.

“John,” Hetty Clarkin began in a frightened, agitated manner.

“I’ll deal with it,” he repeated, and Hetty fell silent.

“I understand, Mr Clarkin, that you do not see very much of Ruth,” Charles went on, keen to strike whilst the iron appeared to be hot.

“She has not been back here since the day she left when she was nothing but a girl of eleven years,” John said with a look of disgruntlement. “But I have seen her alright, out and about with her mistress, playing the part of lady’s maid.”

“Playing the part?” Charles said, and Hetty visibly stiffened.

“Oh, give over, Hetty. We don’t owe Lord Cunningham anything anymore.” John Clarkin was playing right into Charles’s hands, albeit a little aggressively, and he could not help wondering if it was the bulging purse which had swayed him.

In Charles's experience, money usually won out.

"He was good to us, John. And he paid us."

"I know, Hetty, but that stopped the day the child left here, didn't it? What consideration has he given to us since for keeping his secret all these years? Nothing, that's what. Not a penny."

"The child is not with us anymore, John. Why would His Lordship need to keep paying us?" Hetty looked desperate, every bit like a woman who knew that the day she had feared for a long time had finally come. "And think of all the years I worked for him. We have things to be grateful for, John."

"Don't you think *His Lordship* has things to be grateful for, Hetty? Us having to bring up a brand-new baby when our own was already nearly grown?"

"You speak as if he forced us, John."

"He did not need to force us, did he? You were so ready to do your master's bidding, even though you hadn't worked for him for years." John Clarkin was getting angry.

"And he didn't need to force you either, John. One mention of the money, and you were all for it," Hetty said.

Charles stood and watched and listened. He suddenly thought he probably did not need to ask any more questions but simply bear witness to the marital argument that was ensuing.

He did not need to interrogate them at all, for the Clarkins were giving away all their secrets without any sort of careful manipulating on his part. The lower orders really were every bit as stupid as Charles Holt had always thought them to be.

“Well, there isn’t any money now, is there? If a secret is supposed to be kept, it needs to be paid for,” John said firmly and looked at his wife with such a thunderous expression that Charles had a sudden fear he would strike the woman. “Go on out into the kitchen, Hetty,” he said, and Charles breathed a sigh of relief.

“That’s the problem with my wife, Sir,” John Clarkin continued after his wife had scuttled off into the kitchen. “She still thinks she works up at the big house. She is a loyal type, always was, and that’s why she was the first person he came to when he found himself in a spot of bother.”

“He? A spot of bother?” Charles said a little impatiently. “Do you mean the Baron? Lord Cunningham?”

“Yes Sir. I mean Lord Cunningham alright.” He gave a judgemental

little smile. “And we raised the child; we made up all sorts of little lies so that everyone in Hollerton would think she was our own. Raised her right too, and that’s a fact. But she has got herself away now, living up at Thurlow Manor as if she was born to it. Thing is, what Ruth doesn’t know, and I do, is that she was very nearly born to it. The wrong side of the blankets, but one of their own nonetheless.”

“Are you telling me, Mr Clarkin, that Ruth is not your child?” Charles could smell success, and it was a bigger success than he could ever have imagined.

Whatever he paid out now to John Clarkin would be returned to him tenfold, even twentyfold, perhaps even more, when the Duke got to hear of it all.

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you. And we raised her here for the first eleven years of her life.” John Clarkin paused for a moment, and Charles thought, disconcertingly, that he could see a little regret in the man’s face.

“For all the good it did us. Well, Hetty has always been a loyal sort. She worked hard for the Baron up at the Manor, but then she married me, and her service there finished. Still, years later, when he had nowhere else to turn, the Baron arrived at our door all desperate and inside-out with a squealing infant in his arms. Newborn, that’s how young she was.”

“And he asked you to raise the child? For money?”

“That’s exactly what he did. He asked us to raise her as if she was our own. We were to keep his secret, and he would pay handsomely for her upkeep. Once his wife had died, and the girl was old enough to work, it came as no surprise to me that he came back for her. Said he wanted to give her a good life, keep her as lady’s maid to his daughter. Lady’s maid, I ask you! His daughter has no title to speak of.” The man seemed ludicrously dismissive at that point.

“Miss Charlotte?” Charles said pointlessly.

“Yes, that’s right, Miss Charlotte Cunningham.”

“And what of Ruth? Does she still believe that you and Mrs Clarkin are her parents? Or has she found out otherwise?”

“Well, we never told her. But I was not surprised when she didn’t come back here. She never really fit with us, even though Hetty tried to love her. But that’s the thing when you’re raising somebody else’s child; they don’t feel like yours. And we were getting on in years, well, past the age of raising young ’uns, at any rate.”

“So, to be absolutely explicit, Mr Clarkin,” Charles said and fingered the purse in a very obvious manner, pleased to see that the man’s eyes

fixed upon it hungrily. “Am I to take it that Lord Cunningham himself fathered the girl?”

“Yes Sir, that is the truth of it.”

“And might I take it that the mother of the child was not his wife? Not the woman who had given birth to Miss Charlotte Cunningham?”

“That’s right, Sir. And that’s the thing which bothered him more than anything, the idea that his wife might get to hear of it. She was still alive then, you see, and the Baron kept telling my Hetty over and over again that it had just happened, that he had not meant to hurt his wife, and that he could not bear for her to find out.”

“And who was the mother of the child? And where is she now?” Charles was determined to cover every eventuality.

“He never did say who the mother was, but Hetty and I always had an idea that it was somebody who worked up at the house. A servant, you know?”

“Did you have your own suspicions as to who the woman might be?”

“No, none at all. By that time, Hetty had been out of Thurlow Manor for so long that she didn’t really know many of the staff there. I think it was that little bit of distance, not to mention Hetty’s kind and loyal

nature, that led Lord Cunningham to our door in the first place.”

“Well, Mr Clarkin, you have been very helpful. Very helpful indeed,” Charles said, and with a certain amount of ceremony, handed John Clarkin the purse.

Chapter 17

“Shut the door, James.” The Duke barely looked up from the study as his son walked in.

As always, it annoyed James greatly; his father was no stranger to treating him in the same way as he treated everybody else.

“You sent for me, Father?” James had been sent to the Duke’s study by a very embarrassed looking footman, and it was a struggle to keep the annoyance from his voice.

At times like these, the ceasefire between father and son proved to be a little irksome. Before James had a happy life to protect, he would have soothed his own annoyance with a heavy serving of sarcasm.

To smile and keep his bad humour from showing was proving to be increasingly difficult, and James could hardly wait for the day when he could present Charlotte Cunningham to his father as his new fiancée and watch as the old man could do nothing about it.

Assuming Charlotte ever said yes, of course.

“I did. I did.” The Duke finally looked up from his papers and smiled before waving his son amiably into the seat opposite the desk.

James sat down and returned his father's smile. This business of them getting along was going to take some adjusting to.

"Forgive me, Father, but I am packed and ready for my journey to Hanover Hall. I had promised Hector and his father that I would be there in time for a charity reception they are holding this evening."

It was true; he had promised. But that was far from being his reason for haste. Charlotte and her father were attending, and he had sent her the briefest of notes to let her know he would see her there.

After the disappointment of missing his previous intended visit, James was certainly looking forward to seeing her beautiful face again. And, not trusting his father, he had left his message to her until the last minute, not wanting to have to send her yet another long letter of apology for letting her down.

The Duke did not speak for some moments, and James eyed him with suspicion. Surely, he was not going to interfere in his plans again. It had been many weeks since his last visit to the east, and the Duke could have no complaints this time.

"You will not be going to Hanover Hall today, James." The Duke smiled, but it was not the conciliatory smile he had employed of late; it was something far crueler and more self-satisfied.

It was a smile of victory, something James had almost forgotten about in the weeks and weeks of cordiality.

“I have made a firm arrangement,” James said in a steady voice; he knew his anger would not stay buried for long.

“And with whom have you made a firm arrangement, boy?” The Duke’s voice was low and his pale eyes shining with excitement.

“I beg your pardon.” James felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

“With whom have you made your firm arrangement? Hector Hanover or Miss Charlotte Cunningham?” The Duke looked as satisfied as a cat with a helpless mouse between its paws.

“Both.” James was furious; had his father known all along?

All the time James had wasted doing his father’s bidding and keeping him on his side, or so he thought. But the spiteful old man had been interfering with full knowledge for some time; James had no doubt about that.

He could see no sense in trying to hide Charlotte now. Everything was clearly known after all. But how had it become known? Who had

passed such information to his father in the first place?

There were too many unanswered questions flying through his mind, questions that would have to wait until later. For now, he needed to state his case and make his position clear.

“Honest at least.” His father raised his eyebrows and smiled again. “But then, you are not stupid. No point denying something that is clearly known, eh?”

“I will let neither Miss Cunningham nor Hector down again, Father. You might well know that I have an interest in Miss Cunningham, but I should tell you that I intend to marry her. Your interference will make no difference.”

“You will not marry her,” his father said so matter-of-factly that James felt his heart sink.

Why did the Duke seem so very sure of himself?

“I *will* marry her if she will have me,” James reasserted.

“No, you will not.”

“I care nothing for her father’s money,” James said; he guessed that would be the larger part of his father’s objection.

“I realize that. But it is time you started to think of such things. Duchies run on money, and it is up to you to seek it out. I sought out your mother because her father was a wealthy man. A man as wealthy as Lady Felicia’s father as a matter of fact.”

“I will not marry Felicia Trent.”

“I care not, but you will not marry the daughter of Lucas Cunningham.”

So, his father had done a little work, had he? Enough to find out the basics about Charlotte if nothing else.

“I do not see how you can stop me. Unless you want to have me removed as the heir to the Duchy. And even if you do care to embark on such a process, and even if you are successful, which I think extremely unlikely, I do not care. I shall still marry Charlotte if she will have me.”

“No, you shall not.” The Duke laughed, and it was a rotten sound that gurgled in his chest. “If you care about her as you claim to, you will stay away from her from now onward.”

“Stay away?” James was tripping over his words; his father had an ace card up his sleeve, and he knew it.

“If you care about the young woman’s reputation and standing in society, not to mention her undoubtedly delicate feelings, you will keep away from her.” The Duke was dragging the whole thing out and clearly enjoying himself.

“Get to the point,” James hissed and could feel his hands balling into fists on his lap.

“Alright, my dear boy, I shall.” The Duke leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers together over his swollen gut. “If you continue to meet with Charlotte Cunningham, then that young lady is going to be made aware of some facts that will undoubtedly be shocking, if not heartbreaking, to the poor creature.”

“And what facts are these?” James said and wondered just what on earth his father, or one of his emissaries, could possibly have discovered.

“I am sure that your young lady will be most surprised to discover that she has a sister in the world.”

“A sister?” James was dumbfounded.

“Well, a half-sister to be absolutely correct about the thing.”

“Charlotte has a half-sister?” The possibilities were racing through James’ mind.

“Although I believe the young lady is under the mistaken impression that she is an only child. Perhaps she might like to have a sister.” The Duke laughed in a most ugly, bawdy way. “Although I am not sure that she will be pleased to hear the details of how that sister came into the world. Especially not if she has previously thought highly of her father.”

“She thinks very highly of her father and with good reason,” James said angrily, although he knew what was coming. “He is a very fine man, a very fine father, one who only has his daughter’s happiness at heart and not his own wants and wishes.”

James was hoping to make an unfavourable comparison with the Duke but could see already that he would get nowhere with it.

“Then I can only suggest that there was a time when the fine Baron was not so selfless. A time when his own wants and wishes were very much at the forefront of his mind.” The Duke laughed so hard he began to cough. “Or the forefront of his breeches, at any rate,” he went on when the coughing had subsided.

“That is enough!” James said angrily. “You do not even know the family, Father, and I will not hear you discuss them in such an ugly

way. Your behaviour is disgraceful, Sir.”

“Oh dear, that rather sounds like your mother talking. Goodness me, that woman and her dainty ways. If only she had not passed such dainty ways onto her son.”

“It is not dainty to be respectful. And it is not *manly* to be disrespectful and disgusting.”

“Whatever constitutes manliness, my dear James, the facts are as they are, and I think that you will find that I am the winner. I and my insensitive sense of humour would appear to be the victors.”

“Victors? For heaven’s sake, this is not a game; you are talking about people’s lives,” James said desperately. “Mine included.”

“Then it is a good thing for you that I am here to look out for the life that you would so easily squander, is it not?”

“I do not wish for your intervention in any aspect of my life, Father. I do not want it; I do not welcome it.”

“And yet I will intervene anyway, whether you care for it or not.”

“And so, this is a threat?” James wanted to know the worst now.

“It is a promise. Continue in this courtship now I have told you to desist, and Charlotte Cunningham will be the one to suffer. Her father will suffer too, obviously, for no man likes to have his dirty laundry inspected publicly, but I think the daughter will suffer the most.” The Duke looked inappropriately pleased by the last.

“I cannot simply turn my back on her.”

“Yes, you can.”

“I could never be so cold.”

“Then your very warmth of personality is going to be the most painful thing that young lady ever experiences.” As the Duke spoke, James realized how he hated him. “Because she will be told everything. She will not be spared a single part of it. Charlotte Cunningham will know how her father sired another daughter with one of his servants when her own mother lay terribly ill in her sick bed.”

“Servant? Which servant?”

“I do not know which servant.” The Duke shrugged as if the details were unimportant. “Surely that is neither here nor there.”

“In deciding whether or not you are telling the truth, I think that the identity of the servant is very important.”

“You think I am telling a tale, do you? You think I have simply come up with a story and nothing more? You really ought to know better, James. You really ought to know that I am a very determined man, and that I have conducted the most thorough of investigations.”

“And what proof do I have of this thorough investigation? You surely do not expect me to simply take your word for it, given that you are a most *determined* man; determined to have your own way in everything at least.” James had the awful feeling that he was fighting pointlessly; he really did know his father better.

“Well, if you will not take my word for it, perhaps you would do better to speak to the Clarkin family in Hollerton. I am sure that they will be as keen to furnish *you* with the details as they were my own representative.”

“Clarkin?” James said vaguely, knowing he had heard the name somewhere.

“Yes, yes. You have heard the name before, have you not? Allow me to assist.” The Duke smiled slowly and antagonistically. “Does the name *Ruth* Clarkin ring any bells for you?”

“Charlotte’s maid?” James said in disbelief.

“Yes, Charlotte’s maid. All these years the young woman has been fetching and carrying for the Baron’s daughter, little knowing that she is every bit the aristocrat herself. Well, she would be had she been born on the right side of the blankets, but you take my meaning. Ruth Clarkin is Charlotte Cunningham’s younger sister.”

“That cannot be true.”

“Why? Because Charlotte has never mentioned it? My dear boy, the girl knows nothing of her father’s dalliance. That is what makes my own victory so complete, do you not think?”

James could hardly think in a straight line; he closed his eyes and tried to picture the two women as if side-by-side, wondering if there was truly any resemblance. After all, since one was dressed as a lady and the other as a lady’s maid, it was hard to reconcile the two as sisters.

“This is rotten,” James said, unable to think of anything else to say.

“Rotten, perhaps. But clever, do you not think?” The Duke raised his eyebrows, and James could hardly believe that the man was expecting praise for his hateful slyness. “Anyway, I can see that you have had the most dreadful shock, my dear boy, and I think it best that you take a little time now to think about it from every angle, to look at the thing properly, and to come to your own conclusion that there is only

one course of action. You must break all ties with that woman and, furthermore, you must cease to make your little trips to the east. I cannot risk you continuing in this courtship behind my back. I do not trust you, you see.”

“*You do not trust me? That is rather ironic, is it not?*” James said and rose to his feet.

He knew he was unable to stomach another moment of his father’s company, and he would have to leave the room before he was provoked into an action he could only regret.

As much as he despised his father, the Duke had been right; he really would have to look at the thing properly and decide what move to make next.

Charles Holt had hovered in the wide corridor for almost twenty minutes. He knew that James Harrington was in the study with his father receiving the news that had been entirely the fruit of Holt’s own labours.

He hoped that the meeting would be brief, for he did not wish to happen upon any of the household servants whilst he lurked suspiciously.

But he did not want to make himself scarce either, for Charles Holt

did not want to forgo the opportunity to look into the face of the man whose world he had just been instrumental in shaking to its foundations. Charles had worked hard for this moment, and he would have it. He would have it, and he would enjoy it.

As always, it did not occur to Charles to examine his own behaviour. He did not wonder if he was motivated purely by envy, for it did not matter to him. He did not see his own flaws, only a lifetime of injustice that had seen a sarcastic fool of a young man as an heir to the Duchy and himself a simple attorney.

Charles was the cleverer man, and he had just proved that. He had proved it to himself, and now he wanted to prove it to James Harrington. He wanted him to know who had truly brought him to his knees, even if he did not say it.

After a few more minutes, Charles was rewarded for his patience when he heard the Duke's study door creak open.

He straightened himself up and began to walk slowly along the corridor in that direction as if he had simply arrived himself and was making his way to his client for instruction.

James walked out of the study without closing the door behind him. His shoulders were down, sagging a little, and Charles Holt's own spirits began to soar. So, Lord Harrington really did love the

Honourable Miss Charlotte Cunningham. Somehow, it made his own little victory all the sweeter.

James had his head down as he approached Charles; he was clearly deep in thought. But that was not good enough for Charles; he wanted the man to raise his head and look into the face of the clever attorney who had defeated him.

Thinking that his moment would never come, Charles Holt loudly cleared his throat in a bid to gain James Harrington's attention.

His little ruse worked, for the noise seemed to bring the Duke's son back into the here and now. He raised his head immediately and looked directly at Charles.

Charles did not speak, not even to say *good morning* as he ordinarily might. He simply smiled, a slow, satisfying smile.

James Harrington's eyes widened just as the two men passed one another, and Charles knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that he had silently conveyed his victory to the young man he so despised.

Chapter 18

Charlotte had spent a good deal of time and effort on her appearance for the charity reception at Hanover Hall. With the help of Ruth, she really did look her best, and her excitement at the idea of seeing James again had made her radiant.

She had fully expected to see James already in the large drawing room at Hanover Hall when she and her father arrived. After all, he had been due to reach Hanover in the afternoon, at least that was what his message had said, and so she was surprised not to see him there.

Hector was busy for the first hour or so, greeting guests and introducing the charitable ladies whose event he was hosting.

Four very fine women, women of good works, were doing their very best to encourage the rest of the guests to promise a little money here and there for their own small enterprise to help the poor of the area.

Ordinarily, Charlotte would have been pleased to have listened to them speak, to marvel at their unstinting efforts, and to beg her father to make a promise to part with a little money so they might achieve their aims.

But her worry was overtaking her, and Charlotte could hardly

concentrate at all. She wanted to speak to Hector, to find out why it was that his guest had not yet come down from his chamber. Assuming that his guest had arrived at all.

And if he had not arrived, then where was he? If his father had kept him back again with some social engagement that he had thoughtlessly forgotten to mention as had been the case already, surely James would have written to her. He had written to her on two such occasions, and she could see no reason for him not to do so if it had happened again.

It was not in James Harrington's nature to be thoughtless; she was sure of it. She could not think him guilty of failing to attend an engagement without bothering to let her have some notice of it.

But if he had not done so, if he had not been thoughtless, then what else could explain his absence?

For an awful moment, her mind was filled with an image of his overturned carriage somewhere on the road from the west to the east. Could that be the explanation? Could her beloved James be lying helpless somewhere, hurt and unable to continue his journey? Or worse.

Charlotte felt immediately nauseous and suddenly wished with all her heart that it was nothing more than thoughtlessness on James' part.

Anything but the horror that had leaped so readily to mind.

Either way, she knew she must speak to Hector at the earliest opportunity. And to that aim, she immediately excused herself from her father's company, and leaving him in conversation with one of their neighbours, she hastily made her way over to Hector.

"Forgive my intrusion, Hector," she said as she gently laid a hand on his arm.

Hector looked at her and smiled before turning back to the charitable young lady he had been in conversation with for some minutes.

"My dear Miss Myerson, would you excuse me for a few moments?" Hector said warmly. "And when I return, I should very much like to introduce you to the Earl of Morley. He is a very charitable man, and I think that he will find you quite charming, my dear," he added by way of compensation for his abrupt departure.

"I really am so sorry to interrupt, Hector," Charlotte said as she took his proffered arm and allowed him to propel her to the furthest corner of the drawing room. "I did not mean to be so rude, but I am desperate to speak to you."

"My dear Charlotte, I do not think you at all rude," Hector said with his customary broad smile. "But you must tell me what is troubling

you, for you look quite pale.”

“Tell me, Hector, has James not yet arrived? I must admit that I am allowing my imagination to take hold of the reins at the moment, and I am fearing that he has met with some catastrophe en route.”

“Oh, I see,” Hector said and nodded thoughtfully. “I must admit, I had wondered a little something of the same myself. But I received word from a messenger just minutes before I began to receive guests this evening. James is perfectly safe, my dear, you need have no worry on that account.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” Charlotte said and breathed a little more easily. “But did he say what has kept him away? And a messenger? Is that not rather unusual?”

“It was a very simple message, Charlotte, and I am afraid that I cannot read anything into it. He simply states that he will be unable to attend today and forwards his apologies. He does state that he will contact me more fully within the next few days. I daresay he sent the messenger because he did not want either of us to worry as we clearly both have done.” Hector smiled, but he looked a little uneasy.

“I see, well, thank you,” Charlotte said, wanting to ask more but knowing that she very much risked making a fool of herself if she did.

If that was as fulsome as the message to Hector was, then no amount of questioning would provide the answers she was looking for.

And why had James only sent a messenger to Hector? Unless, of course, he had sent one to Thurlow Manor, and she and her father had already left by the time he arrived. Or perhaps he simply assumed that, given she was to be at Hanover Hall that night, she would get to hear of his message from Hector anyway.

Now that Charlotte was relieved to know James was safe, other questions began to flood her mind and make her uneasy. Something felt very strange to her, and yet she could not quite put her finger on it.

When he had previously sent letters to make apologies for not being able to attend, Charlotte had felt crestfallen but had soon recovered, especially with Ruth's help.

But there seemed to be something about this sudden message that gave her the deepest feeling of disquiet. And now she had an evening to get through when all she wanted to do was to return home in the hopes of discovering that James had sent a messenger there too. All she wanted at that moment was to know that he had considered her, not left her to wait and wonder.

All Charlotte really wanted, in truth, was to know that she was

important to him.

Some days later, James sat in his chamber reading and rereading the letter he had received at breakfast. He had immediately recognized Charlotte's beautiful handwriting on the envelope and had quickly stowed the thing in his pocket before his father appeared at the breakfast table.

The moment his father had come striding into the room, James pushed his chair back and rose to his feet. He had no intention whatsoever of remaining at the table and sharing a meal with the man who had managed to ruin his life so completely and with so little effort, seemingly.

"Not eating?" his father said in a bluff and amused tone as he sat down heavily in his chair and immediately began to layer his plate with undercooked bacon.

"I have eaten," James said and began to walk from the room, pleased that he had at least managed to hide the letter in the moments before the Duke had made his entrance.

"I shall let you have your little mood, my boy." The Duke sounded patronizing, and James thought he hated him more than ever. "But

things will return to their old ways soon enough. You will forget your young lady in the east, and you will soon turn your mind to the more important task of finding a suitable bride. But in the meantime, I will humour your sensitive little ways.”

James did not turn back, not trusting himself to answer without taking some other, somewhat more physical, revenge upon his father.

He closed the door behind him and hurried away upstairs, the sound of the Duke’s laughter seeming to follow him as he went. What a truly despicable man he was!

The moment he was in his chamber, James opened the letter and read it at once. He did not even sit at his writing desk but stood in the middle of the room as he took in every word.

“My Dear James,

I was very sorry not to see you at Hector’s charity reception on Saturday. I must admit to you that I was rather frightened in the beginning, thinking that some accident or other had befallen you on the way.

But Hector put my mind at rest in that regard by telling me that you had dispatched a messenger to make your apologies for the evening. I was a little upset to discover that no such messenger had been dispatched to me, but perhaps you thought that one messenger would do very well for the two

of us.

I do not mean to argue with you, James, and most particularly not in a letter. But I am bound to say that since the evening of the ball on the Earl of Morley's estate, I have not seen you once. You know the reason why that ball was so very important to me, and I shall not lay it down on paper for I would hope that it would be important to you too. At least important enough for you to remember it.

I cannot help thinking of another conversation we once had when we met in Wolverton Woods so many months ago. We had both aired our suspicions that the other was simply playing a game. I had truly wondered then if you were showing such interest in me because of the competition and the lively conversations which had passed between us before. But you very quickly convinced me otherwise, not least because you claimed to suspect me of something similar yourself.

But now, when I look back on it all, I wonder if I was just being foolish. I wonder if you did not manage to convince me a little too quickly. And worse still, I cannot help thinking that the moment we shared at Lord Morley's ball was simply the culmination of your efforts to win the little game.

If I am wrong in this, then I apologize wholeheartedly. But it has been so many weeks since I last saw you, and I think you will forgive me if this is nothing more than my own imagination taking over where it ought not to.

Above all things, James, I should very much like to hear from you at least. I should like to know that I am wrong in my painful little assumptions, but if I am not, I should like to hear that also. Whatever it is you have to tell me, James, let it be the truth and nothing else.

I have the greatest hopes of seeing you again, but if that is not the case, I should like to hear that from you.

Regardless, I hope that this letter finds you in good health.

With fondest regards,

Charlotte.”

Finally, James sat down at the writing bureau. He immediately took out a sheet of paper, determined to right back to her that moment. But then he stopped and looked down at the blank page, his sudden realization that he could not respond to her giving him the greatest feeling of helplessness and agitation.

He knew that he could not tell Charlotte that it had just been a game. It would have sealed the whole thing off, that was for certain, but it was the gravest lie, and he would never have her think that he had used her so cruelly.

It was clear that the kiss on that night had meant as much to her as it had, in truth, meant to him. James knew that he would never forget it for as long as he lived, and every time he replayed it in his mind would be a moment of the most exquisite pain.

No, he could not lie and tell Charlotte that he had never loved her, for he knew he would never love anybody else. But neither could he tell her the truth. How could he?

James really had thought the whole thing through, just as his father had suggested that evil day in his study. And the Duke had played his hand very well indeed, for there was no move that James could make that would give him a moment's happiness.

He could not explain the truth of it all to Charlotte, for then she would know everything, and the bond between father and daughter would be lost forever.

In his weaker moments, James blamed Lord Cunningham for it all. If the man had not been so foolish as to father a child with another woman, then his own father would have no threat to hold over him.

But he knew that he was diverting blame away from where it ought really to land; the Duke. Whatever Lord Cunningham's reasons for his behaviour all those years ago, who was James to be the judge of them? He knew nothing of Lord Cunningham's life, certainly not in

the years when Charlotte had been no more than an infant.

And he had seen enough of the man to know that he truly liked him. The baron had accepted him with an openness that no other father might. He did not look at James as the son of the Duke, a young man who would undoubtedly bring favourable circumstances to Thurlow Manor if he chose to marry Charlotte Cunningham.

He had never pushed, never enquired, never angled. Lord Cunningham was always himself; pleasant, agreeable, eccentric. All in all, he was not a man whom James would easily upset.

And if he did, where would it get him? If he was honest with Charlotte and told her everything, every injustice of it, how would that help his cause? Charlotte and her father would still run the risk of the Duke making their private circumstances known if their courtship continued. And the fact that Lord Cunningham had taken the child of his affair into his home would make both him and Charlotte pariahs in society.

No young lady faced with that sort of decision would ever decide to marry and to hell with the consequences. She would undoubtedly do what she could to protect her father, even if her relationship with the man were utterly destroyed.

And of all things, it was *that* which truly stopped James uttering a

single word. He knew that Charlotte's mother had died when she was young and that her father meant the world to her. He had, in this short friendship, quickly realized that he was witnessing a very special bond between father and daughter, and he knew that he could never, ever do anything to break it.

He would be ruining two lives, *three* if he included Ruth Clarkin, for no gain whatsoever. And how well Charlotte regarded her maid, how like sisters they were in their regard for one another already.

But surely that would change when Charlotte realized that Ruth was simply the product of her father's infidelity, her departed mother's humiliation. Perhaps then she would even come to despise the young woman whose friendship she seemed to rely upon.

And yet there was no way for him to tell Charlotte that he truly loved her without exposing a little of the truth. If he told her he loved her, it would be cruelty; cruelty to them both. It would raise her hopes and her expectations, and he would be forced to leave her wondering why it was he loved her but would not see her anymore.

Oh, how complete his father's revenge was. How solid his victory. And how much James despised him for it.

All he could do was ignore her letter entirely. He knew he would never again be able to travel over to the east to see his old friend

Hector without suspicion.

And he knew that he could not risk antagonizing his father, not in this regard at any rate. He could not have the man think he was continuing in his courtship of Charlotte and have her and her father so cruelly exposed.

And so, he would simply have to stay away from her, just as his father had demanded. Without explanation, he would have to turn his back on the only woman he had ever loved to protect her.

What a dreadful thing it was to know that he would be hurting her to save her from pain. It seemed ridiculous, a thing so contrary to sense that it could hardly be supported. And yet it was solid and undeniable. His father had won, and he had lost.

And he had lost *everything*.

Chapter 19

“Miss?” Ruth said gently. “Miss? Will the blue gown suit you for this afternoon or would you rather I found something else in your wardrobe?”

“I beg your pardon, Ruth?” Charlotte said vacantly, knowing her maid had been speaking to her for some minutes. “Oh Ruth, forgive me. I do not mean to ignore you, really, I do not. I just do not seem able to concentrate on anything today. I am afraid it is going to be one of those days in which I cannot quite pull myself together.”

“I am so sorry.” Ruth sat down on the bed at her mistress’ side and took her hand. “You are thinking about *him*, are you not?”

“I wish it were not so, but yes, I am thinking about him,” Charlotte said with a sigh. “How I wish I had never sent him that letter. How I wish I had clung onto that much of my dignity instead of making a fool of myself.”

“You did not make a fool of yourself,” Ruth said firmly and squeezed her hand. “You forget that you showed me that letter, and it was very plain indeed. There was nothing in it for which you should feel ashamed, Miss, nothing at all. If anyone should feel ashamed, it is Lord Harrington for leaving the letter unanswered. You asked him a

very simple question. You asked him for the truth, and he did not give it. That is his disgrace, Miss Charlotte, not yours.”

“You are so very kind,” Charlotte said and felt tears spring to her eyes. She was determined not to let them fall and blinked rapidly, casting her gaze away from Ruth for a moment. “And I know I should be angrier with him and less critical of myself. The truth is, when I *do* feel angry with him, I feel very much better.”

“Then concentrate on your anger for a while, Miss. Ordinarily, I would not suggest it, but if it serves you well on this occasion, then that is what you must do.”

Charlotte nodded thoughtfully, thinking Ruth, as always, was right. She knew also that she would have never managed the last weeks without Ruth’s constant companionship and firm allegiance.

But it was true that she wished she had never sent James the letter. Although she knew that Ruth was right, still she felt as if she had given away a little something of herself by being the one to reach out and ask questions.

Perhaps she ought to have, in the end, played the game just as he had done and said nothing. Perhaps she should have left him wondering exactly what it was *she* thought and felt just as he had left her to wonder in that same way.

The idea that she had alluded to their passionate kiss in that letter made her feel curiously exposed, vulnerable in some way, and she heartily wished that she could take it back.

“The problem is, Ruth, that I find it very hard to maintain my anger with him for long. After all these weeks without a word from him, I am ashamed to admit that my feelings for him are still so very strong. If I could erase it somehow, be done with it completely, I would be so grateful. And I would never be so foolish again as to give my heart to any man.”

“But there is nothing to say that they are all the same. I daresay that we are all crossed in love at some point in our lives, in some way or another. But that does not mean you cannot love somebody else in the future, Miss. You are only twenty, and I am sure you will mend. I know you think of him now, but as time passes, perhaps that will dwindle, and you will come to see it as an episode in your life of little consequence.” Even Ruth did not sound entirely convinced of her words, but Charlotte was grateful for them anyway.

“What you say makes a good deal of sense, my dear. But I can hardly explain to you how I feel at this moment for I fear that I would weep.”

“You know you may weep in my presence, Miss. You know you may be entirely yourself.”

“I know, but I am afraid that if I begin, I shall not stop.” Charlotte paused for a moment to gather herself again. “But I am firm in what I say. As weakened as this has made me feel, I will not let myself come to this again. I will not give my heart away, however great the inducement.”

“But to stay here forever and never marry? That cannot be the life you would wish for yourself.”

“No, I do not intend to stay here forever and never marry; I shall just never give my heart away.”

“Then who will you marry?” Ruth said and seemed justifiably confused.

“I will marry a man of strong common sense and decent wealth. A man I can get along with well enough, but most importantly, a man I will never love. I had wanted to marry for love, you see, and never more so than when James Harrington was in my life. But look where it brought me. Look how close to tears I am at any given moment. Really, my weakness has made me ashamed, and I know that I cannot do this to myself again.”

“But to marry somebody you cannot love,” Ruth said almost plaintively.

“Will be the most sensible thing I have ever done,” Charlotte said and suddenly felt calmer.

It was as if she had, at that moment, made a decision that would keep her life free of discontentment and her heart safe from harm. She was comforted by her own decision, even if her pain in the face of her loss was still so great.

“I cannot help saying that I hope time will see you change your mind,” Ruth said and held Charlotte’s hand all the tighter.

“I think it is far safer for me to remain firm. Do not worry about me; I shall not live without love altogether. I have you, for one thing, and I shall love my children no matter who their father is. But this! This dreadful feeling of helplessness! This is something that I will never subject myself to again.

It had taken Hector Hanover no more than twenty minutes to unpack his belongings before he came cantering down the main staircase of Sandford Hall and into the drawing room where James was waiting for him.

“I say, is it too early for a brandy? Even a sherry would do it,” Hector said brightly.

“Not at all,” James said and rose to make his way to the drinks cabinet. “Which is it to be?”

“Erm, sherry I think. But if it is to be sherry, perhaps it ought to be a large one.” Hector chuckled.

“As you wish,” James said and poured them both a very large helping of sherry.

Hector had already made himself comfortable in one of the fireside chairs, and so James joined him, handing him the sherry glass before sitting down himself.

There was a fire in the grate, albeit not a large one, but it was enough to keep the chill off the afternoon. It was late summer, and it seemed that autumn was keen to make its presence felt as soon as possible.

“I must say, I am glad that you have invited me over to Sandford, my dear chap. I honestly thought I might never see you again.” Hector laughed, but it was clear that there was a little seriousness in his humorous assertion.

“I must beg you to forgive me, Hector. I am sure that you know I would not have disappointed you and your father time and time again as has happened. You must realize that my father played a very heavy hand in it all.”

“You do not need to beg for my forgiveness, James,” Hector said, and his tone had, quite uncharacteristically, become serious. “I knew immediately that the Duke was at the root of it all. But I must admit that I do not know how, and worse still, I do not know what to say to Charlotte. I rather dread any future meeting with my cousin and her father.”

“And for that, I really *must* beg your forgiveness Hector, for I would never have wanted to put you in such an awkward position.”

“Look, just tell me what is going on, James. You do not look like yourself at all.” He held up a hand when it looked as if James was about to speak. “No, no, my dear fellow. I can hardly believe it is only a few weeks since I last saw you because you truly look to have aged.”

“That is an awful low blow to give a fellow who is already down.” James attempted to put their friendship back on its old, comfortable footing of amusement and banter but was failing miserably.

“Well, you know me,” Hector said, trying to play along but quickly abandoning the pretense. “But it is true, you do look as if you lack the correct amount of sleep presently. So, I shall ask you again, what on earth has happened? Why have you seemingly abandoned the young lady I thought you were set to propose to?”

“You must believe me when I tell you that I would not have abandoned Charlotte easily. And yes, I do not sleep well at the moment and cannot think that I ever will again.” James sighed before taking a large gulp of his sherry that drained half the glass. “But there is very little I can tell you.”

“What on earth do you mean?”

“What I mean is, there is very little I can tell you without putting Charlotte in a most dreadful situation.”

“A dreadful situation? Something to do with your father?” Hector said and sat up a little straighter in his seat with a face that was a picture of concern. “But what has he done?”

“My father would seem to have had a great knowledge of my friendship with Charlotte for much longer than I would have given him credit for. And not only that, but he has sought out information that would prevent me from marrying her.”

“But there is nothing in Charlotte’s life, nothing I tell you, that would make her unsuitable,” Hector said in a surprisingly protective tone. “I know I do not know her well, but I am sure I know her well enough to know that there is no scandal about her. She is a very fine woman, James.”

“She is the finest woman, as far as I am concerned, and nothing will ever change my opinion of her. But you know well the sort of man my father is; you have heard me speak ill of him since we were just boys, for goodness sake. Anyway, I have made it clear to you many times that he is a devious man, one who would stick at nothing to get his own way.”

“And so, he has stopped you from seeing her?”

“Very successfully,” James said, and with his second gulp, emptied his sherry glass.

He rose and returned to the drinks cabinet once again, pouring himself another. He looked over his shoulder to Hector and raised his eyebrows in silent question.

“No, no thank you. I have barely started this one,” Hector responded. “But tell me, how is it that your father has managed to stop you from consorting with Charlotte Cunningham?”

“He has made a threat to me that he will make public a piece of information that one of his employees, undoubtedly his attorney, has stumbled upon. Please do not ask me to tell you what that information is, for I cannot. But suffice it to say that it would be particularly painful for Charlotte to discover it, not to mention the fact that it would cause harm to her father also. You see, my father realizes that I

am in love with Charlotte, and that I would do anything to protect her. And so, he is to use that against me, my dear friend. He has managed to make me hurt Charlotte of my own free will. He is clever, is he not?"

"I would say that he is rather more cunning than clever, James. Not to mention despicable." Hector shook his head and glared into the flames. "Really, were I not a guest in this house, I would have it out with him."

"I know you would, Hector. I have sought to do the same myself, but I realized very quickly that I have already lost this battle. There is no way to win it, you see, for I have looked at it under every light and from every angle. In order to protect Charlotte from knowledge that would hurt her, I must hurt her with what she will undoubtedly see as my indifference."

"But can you not tell her at least as much as you have told me? Would that not make things easier?"

"Do you not see that I would still have to say goodbye to her? I cannot marry her; the Duke has made that very clear. That is the point at which he would make everything known to the whole county, and he would collapse the Cunninghams as if they were no more than a deck of cards to him. I cannot do it to her, and I cannot do it to her father."

“Well, whatever this piece of information is, I am bound to tell you that I am inordinately grateful to you, James, for your discretion and your protection of my relatives,” Hector said, and his declaration was absolutely heartfelt; James knew it.

“And I must ask you to help in it all, Hector. You must never press me for the details, for I cannot give them. But worse than that, you cannot give Charlotte any hint that things are anything other than she undoubtedly thinks them to be. It is imperative that she believes that I have simply turned my back on her. Anything else would lead to questions that I cannot answer, and if I am tempted to ease her mind in any way, I risk revealing just enough to let her know that there is something to be told, a secret to be known. And then she would never have peace, would she? She would never be able to move on with her life and find happiness for the fear that there is something in the history of the Cunninghams that would return one day to knock on her door.”

“I say, you really have thought about this very thoroughly, have you not?” Hector said, and James could easily sense his friend’s pity for him.

“And I promise you that I shall never press you for the details, James. Even though they are my relations, I cannot expect you to protect them one moment and expose them the next, even if it is only to me. And, in truth, I cannot help thinking that it is something that I would

rather not know.” Hector finally took a large draw on his sherry. “Cowardly, am I not?” He grinned, and James was grateful for the moment of respite.

“Not at all, my dear fellow. Not at all.”

“You must have no fear that I will do anything other than what you have asked me, James. I will never mention anything of this conversation to Charlotte, nor will I give her any explanation for your continued absence. I will simply tell her that I do not know.”

“And I am afraid that I shall be unable to attend Hanover much in the future. At least not until my father has deemed it safe at any rate.”

“By safe, I assume you mean when you are married away to a woman of his choosing instead of a woman of your choosing?”

“Yes. But since that is not going to happen, then I fear I shall not see you a great deal unless you make the journey here.”

“I am always happy to come to Sanford Hall, my dear fellow. For one thing, your father despises me, and so I am not subjected to any of his dubious company.” Hector laughed.

“As far as that is concerned, I believe that you and I are both in the same boat. I always knew that my father did not hold me in

particularly high regard, but I can only assume that the delight he has taken in upending my life could signify nothing but the deepest dislike of me.”

“Perhaps it is better, in the end, to know exactly where you stand,” Hector said, and James was grateful to him for not trying to pretend that things were otherwise.

As far as James was concerned, he no longer had a father. He would not say it out loud, but he would know it in his heart.

“Thank you, my old friend,” James said and raised his glass in Hector’s direction.

“What do you say we finish off this sherry and get started on the brandy. You might as well drink away your sorrows, and since I have no objection, perhaps I shall join you.”

“What a very fine idea,” James said and set off for the drinks cabinet once more.

Chapter 20

“Are you to eat nothing at all for your breakfast, James?” the Duke said when he interrupted James at the breakfast table the morning after Hector Hanover had departed Sandford Hall.

“As has always been the case, I do not have any inclination for undercooked bacon. It has always been your want rather than mine, as is much else.”

“For goodness sake, you really must get yourself out of this. And I daresay you cannot eat this morning because you have spent the better part of three days with that damned fool friend of yours drinking yourself senseless. That is no way for an heir to the duchy to behave.”

“You think a little drinking makes a man degenerate, do you? Do you not think a man is better judged by his actions? By the way he is content to treat others around him? By what he is prepared to do to his own family?” James spat the words and reached out for the teapot.

The truth of the matter was that he had already eaten a good deal before his father had come into the room. Not the bacon, obviously, but there had been a generous helping of sausage, some eggs, and bread-and-butter.

Of course, he had only eaten so much to settle his stomach, for his father had been right about one thing; he truly had spent the better part of the last three days drinking himself senseless, and it had taken a toll on him in a way that it had never done when he was a younger man.

Still, he would not agree with his father on the matter. In fact, he would never agree with his father on any matter ever again.

“You will come to see the sense of it all one day.” His father stuffed an entire rasher of bacon into his mouth and chewed noisily.

The smacking of his lips, the dreadful mouth sounds, were turning James’ stomach. He had always put up with his father’s rough manners, always remained silent or only been mildly sarcastic. Well, there would be no more of that.

“Is it too much to ask for you to close your mouth when you chew?” James said angrily. “Really, is it any wonder that I do not have an appetite when I sit day in day out opposite *you*?”

“You must get all of this off your chest, my dear boy; I realize that. I have won, and you have lost, and you have taken it very badly. But there will be times in your life where you find yourself the victor; I am sure of it. But in the meantime, keep your opinions to yourself.”

“What sort of man would desire victory over his own flesh and blood? His own son? I know that you wanted money brought into the Duchy, but this is not about that, is it? As far as you are concerned, the greater part of your success has been using that pathetic little lapdog of yours to snuffle around in other people’s business. That is your victory. That is the thing which you like best out of all of this. So, do not tell me that I will thank you for it one day or that I will see the sense in it because I never shall. Because believe me, every time I think of this episode, I will only see a father whose greatest pleasure came from looking down on his own son, always claiming himself to be better, the victor, the winner.”

James pushed his teacup away and glared at his father. “And as far as keeping my opinions to myself, Father, that is what I have largely done these thirty years. But no more. I will speak whenever I have something to say. I will not hold back. I will not coat it in sugar; I will not make a joke of anything in your presence ever again. I will speak, and you will be sick of it.” James pushed his chair back noisily and began to stride towards the door.

“I do hope you will be in a better mood this evening, my dear boy, for Lady Felicia Trent and her father are coming for dinner. I thought it would do you good to be in society other than that of Hector Hanover. Perhaps it will tame this bad humour of yours, eh?” He chuckled as if the two of them were back on the friendly footing of the recent weeks.

But that would never be again, not as long as James lived. He would never forgive his father for what he had done, and if he ever saw an opportunity to return the pain, he would most certainly seize it.

His father might well have stopped him from marrying the woman he loved, but as he had told Hector, he would never force him into a marriage with any other woman.

He would do it bit by bit, but Hector would make sure that his father died thinking that there was no heir and never would be. And that was no more nor less than James wanted for himself now. He would have no wife; he had no need of one.

If he could not have Charlotte, he did not want anybody. And as far as ensuring that the Duchy of Sandford remained in the Harrington family in perpetuity, he could not care less.

He would run the Duchy into the ground when he became Duke if only for the pleasure of knowing that his father would be out there in the churchyard spinning in his grave.

“My mood will be neither here nor there, Father. I will not be taking dinner tonight. As I have said already, I have no appetite.” And with that, he walked out.

Charles Holt made his way into the side entrance, as was customary. Of course, it never failed to irritate him that a man of his standing was not allowed admittance through the front door. After all, he was not a tradesman; he was an attorney. He was one of the most successful attorneys in the county, albeit that he was only so because he had the wealthiest client.

And it was that very client who would never have supported the idea of his attorney making his entrance into Sandford Hall in the same way as he himself did.

As always, Charles could not tell if he hated or revered the Duke of Sandford, and so determined to concentrate his attention on the tremendous amount of money he had earned from the sterling work he had performed in the east of the county.

Not that he thought the money the greater part of his payment if truth were told. He would have done the whole thing for nothing more than the look on James Harrington's face, although he would not mention that particular fact to the Duke. After all, the money would come in very handy indeed.

Charles had arrived at the hall rather early, as was often the case. He knew that the Duke would still be taking his breakfast, and so he made his way towards the study.

It was understood that Charles Holt could enter the Duke's study unattended; he was his attorney after all, and he often did so as he waited for the man to be finished with some meal or other.

As Charles settled down in the chair across the desk from the Duke's, he thought it little wonder that his master had become so fat. The man seemed to do nothing but eat, and it was not uncommon for Charles to have to wait an hour, or even two, for the glutton to finish his breakfast.

Still, he would make himself comfortable and wait. The door was a little ajar, and he would hear the Duke approaching from several feet away; certainly, time enough for him to stand and be ready to show due deference.

And so it was that when the door swung open, Charles Holt gasped in surprise. He had heard no footsteps approaching at all, nor had he heard the Duke's laboured breathing as he generally did.

But it was not the Duke of Sandford who had burst into the room, and it was not the Duke of Sandford who had closed the door behind him and was now bearing down upon the attorney.

It was James Harrington.

"I know your part in all this, Holt," James said, gripping Charles by

his shirt and necktie all at once and lifting him easily out of his chair.

“My Lord ...” Charles said in a high-pitched voice which gave away his fear and made him feel a little ashamed.

“Do not speak.” James Harrington had marched him back across the room and held him firmly up against the wall by his throat.

For all that Charles had always silently berated the heir to the Duchy as a fool and a pathetic excuse for a man, he had to admit at that moment that James Harrington appeared to be a force to be reckoned with.

Charles knew the young man was very well put together, but he had never fully appreciated his size. James was several inches taller than the attorney, not to mention several inches wider. Not fat, like his father, but large, lean, and muscular. And his grip, it turned out, was like steel.

Charles tried to draw in his breath, immediately realizing the constriction. He was still able to breathe, of course, just not as fully as he ordinarily did, and the sensation led him to panic.

He knew that he was shaking, and what was worse, he knew that James Harrington could feel it.

“I know what you did, Holt. I know your part in this, and I have no doubt that you took great delight in it all,” James said in a deep, level voice. “I have always wondered what it is about me that you so despise. *Oh yes*, I have seen it. But I no longer care what it is, Holt. Whatever it is you think I have done to offend you, whatever it is you think warrants what you have done to me, I am here to tell you that you are gravely mistaken. I am here to tell you that you will pay for what you have done.”

Charles opened his mouth to speak, but the look in those bright green eyes that were glaring at him with undisguised hatred persuaded him otherwise, and he remained silent.

For a few awful moments, Charles Holt thought that Lord Harrington was going to kill him, squeeze the life out of him there and then.

He had always thought James Harrington a feckless, pleasure-seeking fool, a man who did not know a moment's seriousness in all his life. But now Charles realized that there was a side to the Duke's son that he had never seen before. As glad as he had been to make the young man's life a misery, to rejoice in the fact that he had been ripped away from a young woman he clearly loved, he had to admit that he had never imagined such a sudden attack.

Charles had assumed that the only consequence he would suffer would be that he would no longer be employed as the Duchy attorney once

the old Duke had finally passed away.

But Charles had always assumed that *that* would happen anyway, and the idea of it had fueled his own spite.

Now he realized that he might be inches away from losing everything, life included, and he was beginning to wish that he had never been involved in any of it in the first place.

“Please, Sir, I beg you, do not kill me. Please do not kill me.” Charles could hear the quaver in his voice and felt the desperate little tears roll down his cheeks.

“You might very well enjoy the Duke’s protection here at Sandford, you miserable little worm, but if you outlive that man, I can assure you that protection ends, and I will make your life a misery. I want you to think on that every time you see me; every time you cross my path in this house, I want you to remember these words. I want you to wonder from here until the time comes exactly what it is I have planned for you. I want it to keep you awake night after night; do you understand me?” Lord Harrington’s nose was almost touching Charles’ own, and he could barely nod his comprehension.

“And I would think very carefully about throwing yourself into any little plan against me in the future. It is a long life, Holt, made even longer for me now that you have ruined it. So, you must always bear

in mind that I am forever plotting against you now, and every ill you do me in the future will only make it worse.”

Charles could feel his windpipe opening as Lord Harrington’s grip on him lessened. But whilst it was his deepest instinct to free himself and run as quickly as he could, he did not want to risk the younger man’s wrath.

James Harrington looked truly murderous, even though he had made it clear that murder was not his intention on that day.

And so, Charles simply stood there, his mouth opening and closing noiselessly like a fish out of water as he tried to drink down the air he had thought he would never fully breathe again.

In the moments that he managed to control his breathing and reach up to dry his shame-filled tears, he felt gripped again as the Duke’s son held firm to the lapels of his tailcoat, swung him wildly, and flung him across the room before turning to leave.

Charles lay on the floor too terrified to move for some moments, fearing all the while that his adversary would return and finish the job he had begun.

When he finally put himself to rights, Charles realized that he would certainly have bruises to inspect later on, not least around his neck.

He adjusted his necktie as best he could in hopes of covering any redness that might be visible, not that the Duke ever paid him close attention, but he had the distinct impression that he ought to keep the events of the last few minutes close to his chest for now.

When he finally heard the laboured breathing and lumbering footsteps approaching, Charles Holt straightened himself up ready to receive the Duke of Sandford. He would say nothing for now until he had worked out what he ought to do for the best.

Chapter 21

“I must admit, I do appreciate your company at this time, Hector,” James said when he greeted his friend in the drawing room of Sandford Hall.

Hector, who had become a regular visitor to Sandford in the three years since James had last been over into the east of the county, fit in very nicely and always made himself comfortable.

On hearing that the Duke of Sandford, who had been ailing for some time, had taken a turn for the worse, Hector made his way over to Sandford Hall without invitation. He simply appeared that morning with a small trunk of belongings, his valet, and his driver.

“Well, I know that you would do the same to me if Pater were on his last legs,” Hector said with a rueful grin. “I know you do not see eye to eye with your father and have not done these last three years, probably never have done if the truth is known, still he is your father, and I do not underestimate the effect of losing him.” Although Hector was rarely serious, whenever he was, he always made the greatest sense.

“The only thing which unsettles me in all of this is the fact that I am to become the Duke very soon. I have never been thrilled by the

prospect, but I am bound to say that I now have no appetite for it whatsoever. I daresay it is because I cannot escape the idea that I am going to be filling my father's shoes."

"Filling his shoes does not make you the same as him, James. It is a title; it is a job of sorts, I suppose. But that is all you inherit, my dear fellow. You do not inherit his character flaws, his idiosyncrasies, his propensity for spite. It is just a title, and it is yours, and I am sure that you will do it very well indeed."

"Is it too early for a brandy?" James said and checked his pocket watch.

"Oh, now that is *my* line. I know these are strange times, but I must insist you come up with lines of your own." Hector grinned and settled down in the armchair. "But a brandy would be very welcome if you have a mind to pour me one."

"What would I have done these last twenty years without Hector Hanover?" James laughed.

"Goodness me; is it twenty years since we were boys at Eton?"

"It most certainly is. A little more, I think."

"How much has changed, and how much has stayed the same."

“Our friendship has certainly remained the same, and I can only be grateful for that.”

“Well, some things are timeless, my dear chap. Some things do not need modernization, do they?”

“I will drink to that,” James said and handed his friend the large brandy before settling down in the chair opposite.

In truth, James really was glad that Hector had arrived unbidden. Whilst it was true that there was certainly no love lost between James and his father, it really did feel like the strangest of times.

The old Duke’s health had been deteriorating slowly and steadily in the last three years, owing largely to the fact that he drank too much, ate too much, and would not listen to his physician on either count.

The fatter he had become, the more his heart had struggled to keep him going. Finally, his heart was on the verge of giving up altogether, and the physician had assured James that it truly could not be more than a matter of days, if that, before the old Duke of Sandford passed away.

“I suppose I shall be my own man now at last,” James said almost to himself.

“Yes, you will be free from your father’s attempts to marry you off, not to mention the fact that Charlotte and dear old Lucas shall be safe from whatever it was he had threatened to expose them for.”

“It is funny, but that was the very first thing to enter my mind when the physician said that my father’s time had come. I could not help thinking that at least he could do no more harm.”

“I rather think you will never forgive him, will you?” Hector said solemnly.

“No, I am afraid I shall not.” He paused for a moment and tipped his head back to look up at the intricate, artistic plasterwork of the ceiling. “You know, I had determined these last three years that when my father lay on his deathbed, I would taunt him with the idea that I would run the Duchy into the ground. I would let the tenant farms go to rack and ruin; I would let Sandford Hall crumble and decay, and I would drink away every penny from the coffers, all the while remaining unmarried and childless, providing no heir.”

“And now?” Hector said cautiously.

“I would be lying if I did not tell you I am still tempted. You see, my father always treated my mother and me as if we were no more than appendages, not real people with lives and feelings, the same hopes

and dreams as others. I know that he made my mother feel helpless on so many occasions and, in the end, he did exactly the same to me, did he not?"

"Yes, I suppose he did."

"And that feeling of exasperation that comes along with it, knowing you are helpless and knowing there is nothing you can do about it, nothing you can do or say to change the matter, eats away at your soul day in and day out. And that feeling has not lessened these last three years."

"But I daresay it is to come to an end quite naturally, without any intervention from you." Hector cast his eyes upwards towards the ceiling as if to indicate the man dying in his sick bed above.

"Yes, it is. And yet I still cannot escape the feeling that my father ought to know that feeling of helplessness, even if it is only once, and even if it is only for a few moments before the end comes."

"I will not lie to you and say that the Duke does not deserve it, for I truly believe that he does. But it is not the Duke who concerns me this day, James, but my oldest friend. You are not a cruel man, and you never have been; that is what sets you apart from your father, what makes you so very different. I truly believe that if you go ahead with such a plan, you will live to regret it, and you do not deserve that.

Such an act would change you, James, and not for the better. There is an opportunity now for you to return to the man you once were.”

“You think me so very changed, then?”

“These last three years you have lost the light that once shone from you, my dear chap. You have lost your humour, and I for one have missed your incredible wit, for you keep it hidden these days.”

“I daresay I have missed it also,” James said solemnly. “But I did not lose it on account of my father. I lost it because I lost *her*, you see. And without her, I cannot see my old spirit returning.”

“There is nothing to say that you have lost her forever,” Hector said solicitously. “After all, my cousin has never married, nor has she ventured down the path of courtship at all since you were last in the east of the county. You need not be a stranger to Hanover Hall anymore either, need you?”

“There is truth in what you say, Hector. But I am afraid that your truth does not account for the scorn of a beautiful young woman who would quite rightly feel I turned my back on her. I have no guarantee at all, do I?”

“There are no guarantees in this life, my friend.”

“Indeed, there are not.”

At that moment, the door opened, and there stood one of the maids looking awkward and nervous.

“What is it, Daisy?” James said in a kindly tone and smiled at the young girl in a bid to reduce her discomfort.

“Forgive me, Lord Harrington, but the physician has asked me to call you up to His Grace’s room.”

“Thank you kindly, Daisy,” James said and rose to his feet. “I shall make my way there now.”

He nodded as the maid curtsied and disappeared from the room.

“I shall be here waiting for you, James,” Hector said with a nod. “And I *know* you to be the better man.”

“Thank you.”

James took the stairs two at a time, sensing the sudden urgency in the situation. He felt nervous and a little as if he was in a dream rather than reality.

How many times he had longed for this moment. How many times in

the last three years he had wished that his father would fall face-down into his plate as he stuffed his mouth with bacon and kidneys day after day.

And yet now that the time had come, James suddenly felt his animosity drain away from him. A life was about to end, even if it belonged to a man he neither loved nor even liked. But still it was a life, and despite his own disagreements with the way it had been lived, its ending still deserved decorum and respect. All lives should end that way.

He took a deep breath outside his father's chamber door before entering. The old Duke looked almost the same as ever he did, his large belly clearly defined beneath the layers of sheets and blankets, his round face as red as always, and his faded yellow hair seeming no more unkempt than it ordinarily did.

And yet there was an aura about the man, a sense that filled the room and spoke of his impending departure from this mortal coil.

"I did not know if you would come," Richard Harrington said in a quiet voice, the only obvious change in him.

"Of course, I came," James said and pushed a small wooden chair closer to the bed before sitting down on it. "I would not leave you alone in these moments."

James turned to the maid who was hovering in the room and smiled at her, nodding his agreement for her to leave the room, to leave father and son alone at last.

“After everything I have done, still you are here. You really are your mother’s son,” he said, but the tone was not disparaging as it had always been. “And finally, I am grateful for that, for your mother raised you well. She raised you not to leave an old man alone dying after all, regardless of what he had done to you.”

“Well, I suppose it is done now.” James could hardly believe that he felt emotional, that he felt a creeping sense of loss.

He knew at that moment that he would not let Hector down; he would not say the spiteful words he had planned and practiced every day of the last three years. And not only for his own sake as Hector had suggested, but his father’s.

He knew he did not have the right to send a man to his grave with such worries in his heart, however many worries that man had caused other people. To do it would be to somehow condone his father’s behaviour. Surely to act in the same way was to *be* the same, and he would not do that.

“We have butted heads these last three years, have we not?” the old

Duke went on weakly.

“Yes, we have.”

“I do not blame you. I mean, I do not blame you for refusing to marry, not after what I did.”

James could hardly believe what he was hearing. It was true that he had spent the last three years in stoic belligerence, refusing the company of any young lady his father suggested, or if accepting it, doing so for his own sport, to make the young lady in question and his father feel as uncomfortable as possible.

More than once, his father had threatened that if he did not marry soon, he would go ahead with his original threat to expose Lord Lucas Cunningham for fathering an illegitimate child with a servant. But James had had enough of threats and had simply told him to go ahead and carry it out and watch James walk away from the Duchy forever.

James issued a threat of his own, a threat to leave the country and live on the continent and let the Duchy fall into whatever hands it may.

The result was a kind of stalemate that had lasted for three years.

“I tried to tell you, Father, that I would never love anybody else, and it was true,” James said, speaking softly, determined not to argue with

his father in those last moments.

“I know, Son. But I suppose I dug in my heels; I had pushed the thing too far, and my pride would not let me go back against it.”

“Well, as I said before, it is done.”

“I do not expect your forgiveness, but I shall tell you *now* what I should have told you before. That you should find her and marry her. I know you are free to do that anyway now. You will be the Duke within the hour; I am sure of it. But I should like you to know in these last moments that I am sorry for what I did to you, and it would please me to know that you would get what you desired in the end.”

“Then I shall do my best to try to win her affections once again,” James said and felt suddenly emotional.

Of all the things he had expected of this day, reconciliation had not formed a part of it. He felt sad that things had not improved between them sooner, that it had taken his father’s dying for this moment to come.

“But you must have a care, James,” the Duke said, and suddenly his breathing became extremely laboured. “You cannot trust Charles Holt. If you dismiss him from this place as I am sure you are bound to do when you are the Duke, he will seek his revenge. He will carry

through my threat; I am sure of it.”

“I shall heed what you say, Father. You have told me now, and you need not worry about it any further.”

“I am sorry that I was not a better father to you. But I suppose it is only facing one’s death which raises questions about the way one has lived his life. I wonder if it is the same for all men.” His breathing became even more laboured, and the reddish complexion began to turn grey.

“I think it is the same for us all, Father.” James blinked hard, feeling the desperate sadness of the situation.

There was so much now that could not be changed, but at least his father had recognized it, had apologized for it. It would not take back all that he had done; in truth, it would not take back a bit of it, but James had a sense that he could now close the door on that; that he could move on with life only looking forward, never looking back.

Perhaps that was as much as could ever have been done.

The old Duke did not speak again but breathed heavily for almost an hour. Intermittently, his breath stopped completely, and each time, James thought that he had gone. But then the breathing would begin again, and James simply reached out and took his father’s hand and

waited for the end.

Before the sun went down on that day, the old Duke of Sandford took his last breath, and his son, contrary to everything he had ever thought would happen in that last moment, cried.

Chapter 22

“I think it would do you good, my dear, to have a few weeks with your Aunt Gwendolyn,” Lucas Cunningham said with a warm smile.

“A change of scenery is a good thing for a person.”

“I remember very little of my Aunt Gwendolyn, Papa, and cannot even say if I like her or not. It is all very well sending me away for a few weeks, but what are you sending me into?” Charlotte said waspishly.

“Dear me, but you have become sour,” the Baron said and laughed heartily. “And I can tell you most faithfully that Gwendolyn Dearborn is a very sweet creature, every bit your mother’s sister. And she is a widow now, so she will be sweeter than ever.”

“Papa, you do say the silliest things,” Charlotte said and finally gave in and laughed. “There is nothing to say that a woman who has become a widow looks more favourably upon the world.”

“They do if their husband was tiresome, which I seem to remember hers was.” Lord Cunningham chuckled.

“This is why I cannot take you out into society, Papa,” Charlotte chastised him playfully, thoroughly enjoying his irreverent sense of humour. “The things you say.”

“At least Ruth finds me amusing, do you not, my dear?” He turned to look across Charlotte’s chamber to where Ruth was packing her mistress’ things into a large wooden trunk.

“Always, My Lord,” Ruth said ambiguously, and the Baron roared with laughter.

“I cannot tell who is the cleverest of the two of you. Perhaps you are as clever as one another.”

“We are, Papa, that is why we get along so well,” Charlotte said truthfully.

“And you will have your dear Ruth with you over in the south of the county, so you are guaranteed a very nice time, are you not?” the Baron went on.

“You are quite determined to have me gone, are you not?” Charlotte said teasingly. “I cannot help thinking that you are up to something.”

“The only thing I am intent upon, my dear daughter, is to see a smile on your face for once. You cannot hover around this house as if you are haunting it like a determined ghost, my dear.”

“I am not as bad as all that.” Charlotte laughed although her father’s

comment certainly rang true.

Charlotte had spent the last three years avoiding any attachment whatsoever. Now at three-and-twenty, every person she ever met in society volubly wondered why it was that such a fine young woman was not yet married.

She had her reasons, of course, but they were certainly not something she could give to the inquisitive ladies and gentlemen of society.

But whilst she had, indeed, been out in society with and without her father, Charlotte had expertly kept any potential suitors at bay.

For a while, her determination made her something of a curiosity, a challenge even, and she had found herself perpetually courted by an array of inordinately suitable young men, even men of title whom other young ladies would have jumped at the chance of attracting.

But Charlotte had been, as far as she was concerned, the object of a challenge once before, and her determination never to be so vulnerable again had not waned by even half an inch over the years.

The truth was that she still thought of James Harrington, even though she had not set eyes on him since the night of the ball on Lord Morley's estate. The night they had kissed.

If she had realized that it would be the last time she would ever see him, Charlotte would never, ever have allowed him to kiss her. She would have turned away from him and walked smartly back through the French windows, out of the seductive night and back to the safety of the ballroom.

She had, in fact, done just that time and time again in her own imagination. And every time she had turned her back on the Duke's son, her spirits soared. That was how it should have ended, with her the victor instead of him.

And that was why she would never allow herself to become a part of any challenge again, for she had come to know that was exactly what she had been to James Harrington. She had known it all along, and yet she had chosen to dismiss it in favour of falling in love with him. Well, she would never be such a fool again.

Despite her determination never to make herself vulnerable, still, she could not always think of him so angrily.

There were times when his handsome smile, his immaculately clipped dark hair with the sprinkling of silver, and those mesmerizing, bright green eyes, came into her mind without invitation.

She always, always indulged the image for a moment or two, remembering what it felt like to be so excited, to be so in love, to have

such high hopes for the future.

Charlotte had filled her time well enough in the last three years, playing bridge with friends, reading, walking, and the usual daily conversations with Ruth.

But it was all wearing a little thin somehow, and her idea of finding a sensible man of reasonable wealth whom she would never risk falling in love with was proving a little more elusive than she had ever imagined.

The problem was that when speaking to some young man or other who was intent upon courting her, Charlotte's tender heart always found something about them to like.

And whilst she had not yet set eyes upon another man who rendered her as helpless as James had done, she knew that where there was *like*, there would undoubtedly, one day, be *love*. Or at least there was a risk that one day love would follow, and she knew it was a risk that she would never take.

Surely, she would be as vulnerable with a man she had slowly fallen in love with as she had been with the man who had taken her heart almost instantly. Love was love, was it not? And as such, it was a thing to be avoided in all forms and at all costs.

“Perhaps not as bad as a real ghost, but surely not far behind,” her father went on, snapping her back into the here and now.

“Well, since I am not engaged in any other way, perhaps I *should* take this little trip to see my mother’s sister. As you say, it might do me good. And if it does not do me good, surely it will not do me harm.” Charlotte shrugged.

In truth, the idea of a change of scenery did appeal to her just a little. Gwendolyn Dearborn lived in the south of the county, and so Charlotte did not imagine that she would find her path crossing with that of Lord Harrington. At least that was what she hoped.

Charlotte had been very determined to find out nothing about James in the last three years, however much she had been tempted to do so on occasion.

From that night at Hanover Hall when Hector had received word from a messenger that his friend would not be coming, Charlotte had chosen never to bring up the subject of James Harrington again.

She had, of course, been in Hector’s company more than once in the last three years and knew very well that Hector was a regular visitor now to Sandford.

But she had determined never to make herself vulnerable again, and

searching for details of James Harrington's life could only serve to make her so.

It would do her no good to hear of the woman he had undoubtedly turned his back on her in favour of, nor would it do her any good to hear that he was now married and had children.

Of course, she did not know that any of this was true, but she thought it best to imagine the worst so that she would never have expectations again of a love of such intensity.

And she had never found a reason other than that which would adequately explain James Harrington's behaviour towards her.

"Well, that is good news. At least now I will not have to write to your aunt and tell her that you cannot make it. Especially after I went to such great pains to secure your visit in the first place," Lord Cunningham said with a smile. "And I suppose you ought to start packing yourself, my dear Ruth."

"I am packed, Lord Cunningham," Ruth said with a smile.

"Then you did not doubt that my daughter would relent in the end?"

"No, Sir; I did not doubt it," Ruth said and turned her broad smile upon Charlotte.

“Well, it is always a good thing to travel with a person who knows you better than you know yourself,” Charlotte said and laughed.

“Indeed, it is, Miss,” Ruth said and closed the lid down on her mistress’ packed trunk.

Chapter 23

In the weeks since his old employer had died, Charles Holt expected every day that the new Duke would dispense with his services at any moment.

But as each day passed without dismissal, he began to wonder if he had been wrong for all those years. Charles had always assumed that James Harrington would be done with him the minute the old Duke died, and yet that did not seem to be the case at all.

It was nearly three years since Lord Harrington had brutally held Charles against the wall of the study and put him in fear of his life.

But from that moment onward, not another word had passed between the two men until the old Duke had finally passed away.

So, Charles simply continued to complete the little tasks that he had been handed prior to Richard Harrington's death. And every month, he received payment for his work, payment that had been approved by the new Duke.

After some weeks of this, and as Charles neared the end of the tasks he had been working on, he was finally called to the new Duke's study.

When he walked through the corridor and tapped lightly at the door, Charles realized it was with far more trepidation than he had ever felt previously.

As much as the old Duke was a difficult man, one given to sudden outbursts of rage, he did not make Charles Holt afraid in the way that James Harrington did.

He knew, even if he did not openly admit it to himself, that he had underestimated that man all those years ago. He had thought him nothing more than a fool who ought to have been more serious and had never once considered what a powerful man James Harrington truly was until they had been eye to eye with Charles' very breath being squeezed out of him.

Indeed, there was a side to the new Duke, a silent and unseen side, that made Charles Holt afraid.

"Come in," came a voice from within, and Charles took a deep breath before walking into the study in what he hoped was a confident, respectful manner.

"Your Grace," Charles said, addressing James Harrington for the first time since his title had changed.

He bowed deeply, all the while his heart racing as he expected either

dismissal or another physical attack.

“I believe you are nearing the end of the tasks my father set you before he died, Holt,” the Duke said levelly. “And so, I have something else that I would like you to look at, if you will.”

“Certainly, Your Grace.” Charles stood with his hands behind his back in front of the great desk in the way that he had always done with the old Duke.

He had never imagined that he would one day have to pay his respects in such a way to the young man he had so despised. And even now, even after having his little bit of revenge three years ago, still it irked him that a person such as James Harrington could find himself a Duke. Still, his old resentment remained.

“I have been looking through the conditions that my father set for the tenant farmers and can see that he charges a higher commission on their crop yields than is regular. I would like it to be dropped by one quarter. To that end, Holt, I would be pleased if you would re-draft the contract for each and every tenant farmer and have them sign.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Charles Holt said. “But will that not lessen the Duchy income?”

“Indeed, it will, although not by a great deal,” the Duke said

thoughtfully. "But I am certain that my father's demands were excessive, and I am determined to put that right. And I am sure that the farmers will be pleased to have a little extra money in their own pockets for a change."

"As you wish, Your Grace." Charles felt the familiar disdain as he looked at his new master.

He was once again reminded of the old Duchess with her shrewd eyes and her clever ways, and he thought that the new Duke did not have an ounce of sense compared with the old Duke.

"That will be all," James said and looked up from his desk to dismiss him.

And at that moment, Charles saw everything he needed to know. There was such a look of revulsion in James Harrington's eyes that he realized nothing had changed between the two men. James Harrington was continuing to employ him in spite of his low regard, and Charles instantly knew the reason for it.

The new Duke was scared of the knowledge that Charles had. His father might be dead, but the old threat to Miss Charlotte Cunningham and the hapless Baron had not died with him.

Charles suddenly felt ten feet tall and full of power over the man who

had held him against the wall and bruised his windpipe.

Charles bowed and turned to leave the room, hiding his smile of self-satisfaction from the man he now thought he had on a piece of string.

When James received a letter from Hector Hanover, he could not be more pleased to read its contents. Some weeks had passed since his father had died, and James was finding that life as the Duke of Sandford was not as tedious as he had imagined it would be.

The truth was that he had already learned everything he needed to know, albeit a little unwillingly, in the preceding years. He had as much time to himself as ever he did and was pleased to put right some of his father's wrongs, particularly concerning the tenant farmers.

And whilst he was not happy exactly, James had found a certain amount of contentment, peace even. He did not miss his father, even though he had mourned his loss in the end.

He was bright enough to know that had the old Duke lived, their relationship would have continued much as it had done throughout James' entire life.

He had realized that there could only ever have been reconciliation at

the end, and he had come to terms with the idea very quickly.

His father's apology had allowed him to close the door and look towards the future, and Hector's words on the day of his father's passing concerning Charlotte and the idea that James might one day win her affections again had made him gently optimistic.

In truth, the only blot on his landscape was Charles Holt. He did not trust the man, and he despised the fact that he had been forced to keep him on by necessity. If nothing else, he could silently thank his father for his last words, for it had never occurred to him the serious damage that Charles Holt could still deliver.

If his father had not spoken so, dismissing Charles Holt from the Duchy of Sandford would have been James' very first act as Duke; an act that would have undoubtedly led to that devious man giving into his own spite and wreaking the havoc that James had previously avoided by sacrificing his own happiness.

But when he had opened Hector's letter and read it at the breakfast table, all thoughts of Charles Holt evaporated entirely.

"My dear James,

I had intended this letter originally as an invitation for you to finally return to Hanover Hall after your lengthy absence. Indeed, Pater has continually

asked when you might visit us again, and I am bound to say that I think the old dear has rather missed you.

But it turns out that I cannot yet extend such an invitation, for I have news which I think will be of particular interest to you.

After a recent visit from dear old Lucas Cunningham, I have discovered that my cousin Charlotte is to be in the south of the county on an extended visit to her aunt.

I do not know if you are particularly acquainted with the woman, but I thought it well worth mentioning since her little estate in the South is actually rather south-east and not so great a distance from Sandford. And even if you do not know the lady, perhaps you have acquaintances in common that might serve you well in the coming weeks.

But to give you more information, the lady is a Mrs Gwendolyn Dearborn of Hawthorne Manor in Rayworth, which I believe is but seven miles from your own fine estate.

It is short notice, I realize, but perhaps it is enough time for you to make some enquiries of your own and to find some way to insert yourself into the same society. Although now that you are Duke, I am sure that you will find very little by way of objection to your attendance anywhere. Oh, the power, my dear chap!

And so it is that I have told my disappointed parent that you will not yet be a visitor to us at Hanover. But perhaps I might fetch the old dear over a few weeks from now to spend a little time with you and me in the comfort of your fine home. What do you say?

Anyway, I have very little else to report, given that it is only a few weeks since we last met, and so I shall end this now and let you immediately set about your own enquiries.

Do respond with your own news, though, for I am as excited to hear it as a young girl waiting for the final part of a romance in three volumes. And let me know what you think of my own proposition for mine and Pater's visit also.

Well, good luck with it all; I am sure it will work out favourably if you put your mind to it.

With kind regards,

Hector."

"As excited as a girl waiting for the final part of a three-volume romance, eh?" James said to himself and laughed. "Thank the Lord himself that you never change, Hector Hanover."

James folded the letter and stowed it in his pocket. He reached out

and helped himself to three more rashers of wonderfully well-cooked, crispy bacon, and poured himself another cup of tea.

His own sudden excitement had given him an appetite, and where he had thought he was finished with his breakfast, he now thought he could entirely eat the same amount all over again.

He had to admit that the name *Dearborn* only rang the very faintest of bells, although he had the idea of a man who had lived very well from the fortunes of a family business, perhaps industry of some kind.

Still, he was sure that he could easily employ the services of a trustworthy attorney to make a few enquiries for him sooner rather than later. What he did know for sure was that the attorney in question would most certainly *not* be Charles Holt.

Within three days of the receipt of Hector's letter, James had not only discovered all the information he had sought but had managed to secure himself an invitation to an afternoon of bridge in the home of Lady Elton.

Employing the services of a Mr Jacob Summerton, attorney at law, he had quickly discovered that his original idea had been right. Giles Dearborn had been the son of a man who had amassed a very decent fortune in industry, and thus he had inherited very well.

Hawthorne Manor, an estate of some note, had been passed onto Giles Dearborn's own son when he himself had died two years before.

But his son had expressed a wish to travel through Europe and see some of its sights, much in the style of the *grand tour* that many young men of note took these days.

In fact, it was a tour that James had wanted to take himself as a young man, but the idea of the polished education and culture it would have afforded him had, predictably, meant very little to his father who had denied his request almost before he had finished making it.

But the young Mr Dearborn, with his mother's full blessing, had taken himself away for a lengthy excursion to see all the delights that Europe had to offer.

Mrs Gwendolyn Dearborn had remained at Hawthorne Manor, something of a pleasant widow who was making the very most of the freedom that her husband's death had afforded her. And that would appear to include an extended visit from her only niece, the child of her dear sister.

Jacob Summerton had immediately proved himself to be worth his weight in gold, not only discovering *that* much information but making a very comprehensive list of the acquaintances that the new Duke and Mrs Gwendolyn Dearborn had in common.

Without asking a question as to the Duke's intentions, that fine attorney had gone on to discover a list of engagements to which he felt sure Mrs Dearborn would be invited, and it was left to James to hope that she would take her visiting niece with her.

And so it was that James found himself nervously preparing for an afternoon of bridge at the home of Lady Elton. He knew the fine lady very well indeed, although he had never played a single hand of bridge under her roof.

James simply knew her from so many other events that the two had attended in common and was pleased to be extended an invitation to her long-standing bridge game when he had called upon her almost as soon as his new attorney had given him the requisite information.

He had done his best to give Lady Elton the idea that he was intent upon making his mark in the county as the new Duke, and therefore, finding himself as many fine social events as he could manage.

Although he could see that she was not entirely convinced by his assertion, he could also see that she was pleased nonetheless to find herself the subject of the new Duke's interest.

Her home had never been graced by the old Duke, and James was sure that his father had barely spared a word for the dear old lady when

their paths had crossed in years gone by.

But James always had, and he realized now that it was going to pay dividends. Lady Elton was a sociable woman, and she would undoubtedly be a very pleasant stepping-stone to other such events due to take place whilst Miss Charlotte Cunningham was staying at Hawthorne Manor.

When Samuel Jones, his valet, had finally finished dressing him, James stood alone in his chamber for some minutes surveying his appearance in the mirror.

He remembered well how Charlotte had always seemed to like his immaculate appearance, and he checked himself over from head to foot to make sure that there was not a hair out of place or a speck of dust anywhere on his deep blue waistcoat and tailcoat.

He studied his own face and could see that he had changed a little in the last three years. His hair, although still immaculate, had a few more strands of silver woven through its darkness, and the skin around his eyes had developed a few deep lines.

He was still only three-and-thirty, and he knew he certainly did not look old by any stretch of the imagination. He just looked older than he did.

James wondered then what changes would have been visited upon Charlotte herself. At ten years younger than him, he could hardly imagine that the hands of time would have done anything to that beautiful face, that clear glowing skin, and those bright blue eyes.

But more than anything, he longed to look at her, to see that slightly uneven, slightly sardonic smile and the little hint of mischief that had always seemed to shine from her whenever the two of them embarked upon one of their more lively conversations.

James could only hope that they would one day enjoy such a conversation again, for as it stood, he did not even know if she would acknowledge him. In truth, he did not know she would be there, for he had not dared to ask Lady Elton and risk giving away his true intentions.

All he had at that moment was hope. Hope that she would be there, hope that she would acknowledge him, and hope that she would not turn away as he had done three years before.

Chapter 24

As Charlotte prepared for the afternoon of bridge, she found that she was rather looking forward to it. Ruth had made her look very well indeed in a pale green gown that made her bright chestnut hair stand out beautifully.

She had only been at Hawthorne Manor for a few days, and already Charlotte felt very much at home. She did not have any particular memories of her own mother, just an impression of softness and kindness.

And she had just that same impression from the moment she had met with her aunt again after so many years.

Gwendolyn Dearborn was a person to whom Charlotte could instantly warm, feeling almost as if she had known her all her life when, in truth, she had only seen her a few times before and only when she had been an infant.

But there was a presence about Gwendolyn that made her feel comfortable and safe. There was something about her Aunt Gwendolyn that was very motherly, and it went beyond the similarity of feeling, the reminders of her own mother.

Not only that, but Gwendolyn Dearborn was also a very interesting woman who seemed to have survived a trying marriage to a trying man, somehow successfully raising a son who, by all accounts, was a fine young man indeed.

Having heard him described by all as interesting and handsome, Charlotte could not help being pleased that he was away in Europe. Interesting and handsome were not welcome traits in a man as far as Charlotte Cunningham was concerned. They were very dangerous traits.

“How do you feel about your first social engagement here, Miss?” Ruth said as she untied two small, twisted pieces of rag from Charlotte’s hair and let two perfectly formed ringlets drop free.

“I must admit I am looking forward to it,” Charlotte said brightly. “And I really am very glad that I came. Although you were right all along; I was always going to come. I suppose I was just being a little pettish because my father had arranged it all without telling me.”

“I know he did, Miss, but I am sure that he did so out of kindness. He has been worried about you for some time; I can see it in his face.”

“And I wish he would not worry, Ruth, for there is nothing to worry about.” Charlotte could not bear the idea of her father worrying about her, but she had told him time and again that there was no cause for

concern, and yet he would not have it.

“He worries because he can see with his own eyes what I know for certain. What I know because you have told me,” Ruth said firmly.

“That you have no intention to settle into a happy life of any kind.”

“I *do* want a happy life, Ruth. Or at least I want a contented one; is that not the same thing?”

“No, it is not the same thing.”

“My dearest Ruth, I cannot count the number of times you and I have had the same conversation,” Charlotte said, and both women laughed.

“And I really do appreciate your concern and your kindness more than I could say.”

“It is not just concern, Miss. It is sadness.”

“My goodness, I have made you sad?” Charlotte said and raised her hand to her chest. “But why?”

“I suppose it is because I cannot bear the idea you will not let yourself be happy. I understand why, or at least I did. But it seems so long ago now, does it not? Could you not open your heart to let somebody else in, somebody who will not disappoint you?”

“That is the problem, Ruth. How on earth am I to know in the beginning if the man I am speaking to will not disappoint me just the same? There is no way of telling, you see. There is no guarantee.”

“There are never any guarantees in life, Miss. Except perhaps one.”

“And that is?”

“If you do not allow happiness in, it will not come. *That* is guaranteed.”

“Yes, you are right,” Charlotte said and felt the full weight of her maid’s words. As always, Ruth had managed to alight upon some subject that Charlotte had already considered in secret. She had already mourned the loss of future happiness and had found it very hard.

“But even now I still cannot risk it. I still cannot forget how I felt back then, how hurt I was. Not to mention how very foolish I felt.”

“The time has come to let that go; otherwise, you really will end up marrying some dreadful man of sense whom you will never love. And when you have married him, whoever he is, it will be too late to change your mind.”

“But that is the whole point,” Charlotte said simply.

“I know you have thought about it back and forth, time and time again, but I wish you would consider it further. I wish you could imagine yourself, your future self, trapped forever with a man you cannot bear to be beside. Surely, in the end, you would come to despise one another, and that is no way to live. That is not the best use of the life you have been given, Miss.”

Charlotte did think about it, and it made her feel suddenly very low. She had spent the last three years trying to avoid the sort of feelings that had crushed her and made her feel stupid, unattractive, and insignificant. And even though she had concentrated now and again on the sort of feelings which had come before, the excitement, the hope, love, Charlotte knew that she had dwelt predominantly in the negativity of it all.

But it was that negativity that she could not shake, and she knew that it had changed her. She knew that she had lost the spark that had once been hers, the sharpness of wit and the confidence to deliver it in conversation, the zest for complicated and highly charged banter.

Just as Charlotte had been about to respond, there came a light tapping on her chamber door, and her aunt's face appeared around it, seeming to float in isolation.

“Oh, I say, you do look beautiful,” Gwendolyn said and smiled

brightly. "So beautiful, in fact, that I would say that you are ready."

"Oh dear, is the driver waiting for us?"

"Fear not, Charlotte, he is a patient man." Gwendolyn laughed, and Charlotte thought she liked her more and more.

She had a nice sense of humour, always confidently given, and always, always, graceful and kind.

Charlotte rose to her feet and looked to Ruth for confirmation that she was truly ready. When her maid nodded and smiled, Charlotte gripped her hands, kissed her cheek, and bid her farewell for the afternoon.

As Charlotte and Gwendolyn set off in the little carriage, she heartily wished that she could have taken Ruth with her. How close she felt to her maid, how much she thought of her as the finest friend she had in all the world. And how hard it seemed, harder by the day, to always be leaving her behind.

As the years had gone on, Charlotte had always felt it a little unfair that the larger part of Ruth's time was spent in making sure that Charlotte was fit to go out and enjoy herself.

If only things could be different in the world; if only they could go out arm in arm and enjoy an afternoon of bridge together or any other

sort of delightful social engagement.

“You are a little quiet, my dear,” Gwendolyn said as the carriage rumbled along. “Are you alright?”

“Yes, I am perfectly alright, Aunt Gwendolyn,” Charlotte said and turned to give her aunt a bright smile of confirmation.

Charlotte hardly knew if Gwendolyn looked like her mother had done, but she rather suspected that she did. She had shining chestnut hair, just like Charlotte’s own, albeit a little faded and occasionally sprinkled with grey.

Gwendolyn’s skin was still very fine, despite the little wrinkles here and there, and Charlotte thought that all in all, she made a very handsome widow.

“Because if you are feeling at all nervous, you really need not. Lady Elton is a wonderful woman. She is advancing in years, but she has some very modern and interesting ideas. She is very sharp-eyed and intelligent, just like you, my dear. I think that the two of you will get along very well indeed.”

“Then I am looking forward to meeting her very much,” Charlotte said brightly.

“And she always has the most interesting people at her bridge afternoons. I have been attending myself for many years and have seen a wonderful array of people come and go.”

“Are there many who accept the standing invitation as you do, Aunt Gwendolyn?”

“Oh yes, there are a fair few. But it is true to say that there are always new faces to be seen, for news of her fine bridge afternoons travels far and wide. And I must say, she does put on a very good spread given that it is only an afternoon affair.” Gwendolyn’s eyes widened making Charlotte laugh. “Well, it is true to say that I rarely take a full dinner in the evening after I have visited Lady Elton.”

“No wonder her events are so well attended.” Charlotte smiled broadly.

When the carriage drew up, Charlotte looked out upon a very fine stone-built townhouse. It looked very smart indeed, more like something that a bright young person might live in rather than a widow of many years standing. Already she was finding Lady Elton something of a draw.

And meeting the woman herself in the entrance hall of a modernly appointed interior, Charlotte knew already that she liked her very much.

“I say, you are the image of your aunt,” Lady Elton said enthusiastically. “Such a pretty girl. And I believe you are a very smart young lady too, and *smart* is a thing to be clung onto. Smart does not fade as beauty does. It is one of the few things which gets better with age.” Lady Elton smiled broadly, her pale blue eyes wide and intelligent.

“I promise you already, Lady Elton, that I shall do my very best to cling onto my smartness,” Charlotte said and was pleased when the old lady threw her head back and laughed.

“I must say, I like you already, young lady.” Lady Elton took hold of Charlotte’s arm and led her towards the drawing room.

“What a very lovely room,” Charlotte said truthfully as she looked at the modern pale walls contrasting against bright, imaginative brocade-covered furniture. “In fact, it is a very lovely home altogether.”

“Thank you kindly, my dear. I do hope that you will be a regular guest whilst you are staying with your aunt.” She turned to look at Gwendolyn. “You will see to that, my dear Gwendolyn, will you not? Perhaps the three of us could take afternoon tea this week?”

Charlotte felt a warm glow and rather liked the idea of this bright and interesting lady taking an interest in her. She already knew that she

would gladly sit down to afternoon tea and find herself most amused and diverted by such a woman.

“Oh yes, I would like that very much indeed,” Charlotte said enthusiastically as she looked around the room.

“Well, what a very fortuitous week I am having,” Lady Elton said as she led Charlotte and Gwendolyn further into the drawing room. “And such wonderful new faces for my bridge afternoon.”

“So, my dear niece is not the only newcomer this week, Lady Elton?” Gwendolyn said inquisitively.

“Oh no, I have another guest I was not expecting. But I must admit, it is all rather exciting.”

“But who is your other guest, my dear?” Gwendolyn said, and Charlotte almost laughed at her aunt’s insistence.

“You will not believe it, but the new Duke of Sandford.” Lady Elton’s tone had quietened to a whisper.

“Goodness me, but his father never attended the bridge, did he?” Gwendolyn said in gossipy tones.

“No, I am as surprised as anybody.”

As her aunt and Lady Elton continued to whisper to one another, Charlotte felt her mouth go dry. *The new Duke of Sandford? His father had never attended the bridge?*

But surely that could only mean that not only was James Harrington the new Duke of Sandford, but that he was somewhere in that large, modern drawing room.

As Charlotte looked all around her, fearful that she would see him and equally fearful that she would not, a man in the corner of the room turned slowly. Before he was fully facing her, Charlotte knew it was him.

He was, as always, the tallest man in the room, and his hair and clothing as immaculate as ever. When he had turned fully, Charlotte felt his eyes fix upon her own, and she held her breath.

After three long years, she was finally looking into the bright green eyes of James Harrington.

Chapter 25

Charlotte did not realize she was holding her breath until she began to feel lightheaded. Beads of cold sweat had formed on her back and she felt uncomfortable in every possible way. She knew she had to turn away from him, to find someone to talk to so that she might escape the handsome face and mesmerizing eyes, but she was finding the effort to tear her gaze from him an arduously physical one.

She was vaguely aware that her aunt and Lady Elton continued to chatter amiably, although she could not focus at all on what they were saying. Her mouth went dry and she knew she could not speak to James if he made his way to her.

A sense of panic was beginning to rise in her chest and, more than anything, Charlotte wanted to run. She wanted to turn and flee, to tear through the house and out into the fresh air, never stopping once to look back. This was too much; she was too shocked and hardly knew how to continue.

Charlotte needed a distraction. She needed somebody else to talk to so that she might keep away from James Harrington without it becoming obvious to anybody. She could turn her attention back to her aunt, but there was a very real possibility that Lady Elton would see fit to attempt to introduce her to the new Duke and Charlotte knew she

could not possibly get through that without giving herself away. She needed time to think and time to gather the emotions that seemed to swirl in her chest and ricochet off the walls of her ribcage. She felt hot and cold, panicked and nauseous, and she knew she would have to act.

The moment James, his eyes still on hers, took a single step in her direction, it was as if Charlotte had been freed from restraints suddenly and she sprang into action.

She turned back to her aunt and Lady Elton and smiled brightly before looking all around the room. Charlotte immediately fixed on an older man of perhaps forty years who was beginning to rise from one of the bridge tables. She could see that he was thanking his bridge partner without much enthusiasm before casting a speculative eye about the room.

Charlotte hoped with all her heart that the fair-haired man was looking for another game otherwise, she was about to make a fool of herself.

“Lady Elton, who is that gentleman just rising from his game? I am certain I know him from somewhere but cannot place him.” She was talking quickly and knew she must calm down to avoid raising either the suspicions of her aunt or Lady Elton.

“Oh, that is Marcus Hillington, my dear. He is awfully clever, especially when it comes to investments and what-have-you, but he is a rather quiet sort of a man. One of the few who attends my afternoons solely to play bridge rather than to chatter.” Lady Elton shrugged as if she could not fathom the man’s attitude at all.

“Would you mind introducing me? I am still certain I have met him before. Perhaps if he is in want of a bridge partner, I could play a game with him and see if I can lay my burning curiosity to rest.” Charlotte went on brightly before turning to her aunt. “Would you mind at all, Aunt Gwendolyn? I should rather like to play.”

“Not at all my dear.” Gwendolyn smiled but looked a little curious, as did Lady Elton who clearly could not imagine anybody finding anything of interest in Marcus Hillington.

Charlotte looked over to where Marcus Hillington stood and took a step in his direction, hoping that the move would hurry Lady Elton along before James appeared on the edge of their group and she found herself trapped.

“My dear Mr. Hillington.” Lady Elton began warmly as the three women approached. “Might I introduce you to a prospective bridge partner?”

Marcus Hillington’s expression eased a little. Initially, he had looked a

little perturbed as if he might be expected to conduct a lengthy and, to him, boring conversation. But the promise of a bridge partner instead seemed to mollify him, and he gave Charlotte a tight-lipped smile that seemed more disinterested than displeased.

“Of course, Lady Elton.” He said and Charlotte almost winced at the flatness of his tone.

“This is Miss Charlotte Cunningham, and she is very keen to play.” Lady Elton went on, clearly still a little wrong-footed by Charlotte’s unexpected interest in the duller person in the room.

“How nice to meet you, Miss Cunningham. I see there is another pair ready to play if you would follow me.” He said and set off before Charlotte had even a chance to return his greeting.

She stood stock still for a moment before coming to her senses, smiling at her aunt and Lady Elton, and following along in his wake.

It was a curious moment and she could not help but think that, were she not desperate, she would have left the disinterested man to wander across the drawing alone and find herself someone livelier to spend her time with.

But she was desperate, and it left her with little choice. As she walked away, Charlotte could hear her aunt and Lady Elton immediately

begin to strike up conversation. She could not hear exactly what they were saying, but the confused tones led her to suspect they were discussing her own curious behavior.

She had undoubtedly sparked their interest, not to mention the suspicion she had been hoping to avoid, but she would simply have to worry about that later. For now, she would have to concentrate hard on a bridge game she did not want to play and do something to recover from the shock of seeing James there before her.

“Thank you.” Charlotte said quietly as Marcus Hillington mechanically pulled out her chair.

As she sat and made herself comfortable, Charlotte could not help but look across the room to see what James was doing.

And, sure enough, he was staring over at her.

James could hardly believe how seeing Charlotte again would have affected him. He had been anticipating the sight of her for days now, ever since he had secured his invite from Lady Elton.

But to see her in the flesh almost floored him.

He had imagined Charlotte over and over in his mind, drawing her likeness to mind every day of the last three years. But his memory had surely played him false for he was taken aback by just how beautiful she was, even more than he had remembered.

When she had turned to look at him, James felt incredibly guilty. He had shocked her, and he knew it, but he could not imagine how it could have been avoided. If he had written to her beforehand to let him know that he would be at Lady Elton's bridge afternoon, James knew that there was a strong likelihood that Charlotte would never have come at all.

And yet the look on her face had dug hard into his heart, affecting him greatly. She looked stunned, as well she might. James had thought that she would turn away from him immediately, but she did not, she just continued to stare back. The whole thing had reminded him a little cruelly of the very first day he had seen her, that very first time when he had stared at her outside Hanover Hall and she, not willing to give in, had stared back.

But there was nothing playful about this, nothing new and wondrous. It was a look which contained everything, hurt and pain, anger, and resentment; even fear. And why would she not be fearful? After all, she was away from home, in a new environment altogether, and she had suddenly been confronted with the man who had let her down so badly.

James had wanted to rescue her from her own feelings, to dash across to her and tell her that he loved her still, he always had. He wanted to wipe away three years of uncertainty and tell her that nothing had ever changed for him.

The moment he had taken that first step, he saw Charlotte draw in a breath before turning away from him and looking all about the room. Instead of continuing to make his way towards her, James simply stood where he was. He knew that she was looking for some escape and that he would have to allow her that much. After all, did he not owe her the right to have this first meeting after so many years conducted in a manner that *she* saw fit rather than a manner that *he* saw fit?

Yes, he had no doubt that Charlotte Cunningham had earned that right and so he stayed where he was and watched, fighting every instinct to go to her and take her in his arms.

James looked on helplessly as Charlotte was introduced to a man some years older than he was, a fair-haired man who seemed to be almost entirely expressionless. But James understood entirely why Charlotte had chosen him; a man so disinterested would undoubtedly be easy company in which a young woman could put her own emotions to rights again.

And yet still it hurt somehow; it pained him to see her dashing off in the direction of another man, any other man, and for any reason. He knew he did not have a right to such hurt, but he also knew that everything that had gone before had hurt him too.

But, of course, Charlotte could not be expected to know that. As far as she was concerned he had kissed her and walked away.

James, for his part, could not begin to see how he could ever put that right again. As kind as it had been of Hector to make him aware of Charlotte's close proximity, perhaps it would have been kinder had he said nothing.

"Have you managed to get a game yet, Your Grace?" Lady Elton said, smiling warmly as she bore down upon him.

She had whom he assumed to be Gwendolyn Dearborn in tow, holding that lady's hand in her own and clearly getting ready to make an introduction.

There certainly was a family resemblance and, had he known no different, James might have thought the gently aging woman with the faded chestnut hair to be Charlotte's mother.

"No, I have not had a mind to play just yet. I am rather enjoying your wonderful drawing room and very fine company, My Lady." James

said and inclined his head respectfully.

In truth, he did not particularly feel like holding up his end of the conversation, but he knew he could not escape it. In any case, it might be advantageous to make the acquaintance Charlotte's aunt.

"Then might I introduce you to yet more wonderful company, Your Grace?" Lady Elton said and turned to look at her companion. "This is Mrs. Gwendolyn Dearborn."

"How very nice to meet you, Mrs. Dearborn," James said and bowed deeply. "I do believe I know your name although I am certain that we have never met."

"Oh, it is very nice to meet you, at last, Your Grace." Mrs. Dearborn said and bobbed dutifully.

"Mrs. Dearborn is a great friend of mine, Your Grace, and a regular attendee at my bridge afternoons." Lady Elton peered over her shoulder to where Charlotte was determinedly keeping her focus on the game at hand, looking almost as intent on it as her rather dull partner. "And hopefully, once Mrs. Dearborn's niece is finished playing her current game, I might be able to introduce you to her also."

"I am already acquainted with Miss Charlotte Cunningham." James

said, realizing that he must do something.

It was enough, surely, that he had upended Charlotte so cruelly that he did not need to put her through the ordeal of an introduction if all she wanted in the world was to be away from him.

“Oh, I see.” Lady Elton said and tried to hide her surprise in a way that Gwendolyn Dearborn could not.

“Yes, I met Miss Cunningham some years ago when I was a guest at Hanover Hall. And I have been a guest on a number of occasions at Thurlow manor also.” He spoke in a noncommittal way and he watched as both women slowly came to their own conclusions.

Gwendolyn Dearborn frowned a little but quickly recovered herself and James could see that she had realized that there had, at some stage, been something of significance between the two of them.

“Oh yes, of course.” Gwendolyn said hurriedly as if to smooth over the conversation altogether, perhaps even seal it off.

“So, you must let Miss Cunningham continue in her game, I would not have her disturbed simply for the sake of it.” James smiled and looked over again to where Charlotte was concentrating for all she was worth.

He allowed himself a few moments study of her, not caring about the suspicions of the two ladies in his company. Charlotte's skin had not changed, and her hair was still as vibrant as ever. But the amused, sardonic tilt of her mouth seemed to have been flattened out and he knew it had much to do with him.

"Quite so, Your Grace." Lady Elton said brightly, catching on to the whole thing.

"Tell me, who is the gentleman who partners Miss Cunningham?" James said in a light tone that was designed to sound barely interested. "I do not think I have ever seen him before."

"Oh, that is Marcus Hillington." Lady Elton said conversationally. "He is a very bright sort of a man, very clever with investments. I believe he is able to take a small purse of money and turn it into a very large one simply by placing it in *this and that* idea. I must admit, I do not understand the thing at all, but I believe that he is a very wealthy man."

"And he has a family?" James knew that his question could not possibly sound disinterested, but he had no other way of framing it.

Whilst he did not seriously consider any particular regard on Charlotte's part for the man she was sitting next to, still he wanted to know a little more about the austere-looking fair-haired man. More

importantly, he wanted to know if the man was already married.

“No, Your Grace, he is a bachelor.” Lady Elton said, and he knew that she was now very sensible of his reason for attending her afternoon of bridge in the first place.

James knew that he would get nowhere else with his questioning, surely there was nothing else to find. It was clear that Charlotte had not already known her bridge partner before being introduced that day. And if he had not surprised her in the way that he had, James was certain that she would never have sought an introduction to Marcus Hillington in the first place.

No, this was just the beginning and Charlotte was going to need time to adjust to all of it. And James knew that she might never adjust to it, she might never want him in her life again. But he knew that there was more to be tried first before he gave up on her entirely and, in the meantime, he would do what he could to ensure that he had not offended his hostess.

“Lady Elton, would you care for a game?” He said, changing the subject altogether and smiling brightly at a very appreciative Lady Elton.

Chapter 26

“Did you sleep well, my dear?” Gwendolyn said as she bustled into the dining room where Charlotte was already sitting down to breakfast.

“Oh yes, thank you kindly.” Charlotte lied and felt sure that the puffiness around her eyes would give her away.

“This arrived for you just moments ago.” Gwendolyn handed Charlotte a letter.

Charlotte immediately recognized the handwriting, even though she had not seen it for years. It was a letter from James, she had no doubt about that. She was seized by a somewhat less intense feeling of shock than the one she had suffered the day before in Lady Elton’s drawing room, but it was unsettling nonetheless.

On very little sleep, the arrival of his letter was all too much, and Charlotte folded it roughly and stowed it, unopened, into the pocket of her gown.

Gwendolyn did not speak at first, she simply sat down at the table and poured herself some tea from the pot. She made no move to help herself to anything from the breakfast dishes but instead leaned back in her chair, closed her eyes, and took a sip of hot tea.

“I cannot quite face breakfast until I have had a cup of tea.” Gwendolyn said gently.

“I must admit I always wake up hungry, Aunt Gwendolyn.” Charlotte knew that this was small talk and it was making her strangely uncomfortable.

“Even when you have hardly slept?” Gwendolyn’s question was unexpectedly pointed although delivered with kindness.

“Yes.” Charlotte said and felt her cheeks reddening.

“I do not mean to upset you, my dear.”

“You have not upset me, Aunt Gwendolyn.”

“The letter is from him, is it not?” Gwendolyn said, surprising Charlotte even further. “From the Duke of Sandford, I mean.”

For a moment, Charlotte simply looked at her aunt helplessly. She was surprised at the woman’s instinct, and yet she ought not to have been. For one thing, her behavior in Lady Elton’s drawing room must have been most bizarre. Her insistence that she be introduced to Marcus Hillington must have raised her aunt’s suspicions, and perhaps she had even seen Charlotte look at the Duke and hurriedly turn away from

him.

However, if her aunt had discovered their connection, there seemed little point in denying it now.

“Yes, I recognize the handwriting.” Charlotte said simply.

She stared down at her plate for a moment and wondered what on earth she would say next. She was glad, however, that the fire in her cheeks had gone out and her skin was very likely returned to its customary color.

“I am afraid that the Duke gave himself away, my dear. He could not concentrate on conversation with Lady Elton and me for looking across the room to where you were. In the end, he had to admit to knowing you, but it was his questions about Marcus Hillington which truly uncovered him.”

“Marcus Hillington?” Charlotte said incredulously.

“He asked a number of questions which I think were designed to look like mild interest. But he very soon came to the question of Marcus Hillington’s wife or lack thereof, and I knew then that the Duke has some feeling for you. I am right, am I not?”

“I do not think for a minute that the Duke of Sandford has any feelings

for me.” Charlotte said and was surprised by the bitterness in her tone.

“But why do you say that? What passed between the two of you that you would sooner spend the afternoon with the dullest man in all the county?”

“Marcus Hillington was very pleasant, Aunt Gwendolyn.” Charlotte said in rushed defense of a man who was truly very dull indeed.

“But Marcus Hillington is not really the subject of interest here, is he?”

“No, I suppose he is not.”

“The Duke said that he had been to Thurlow Manor, Charlotte. Were you very close?”

“I had thought we were,” Charlotte said sadly. “But it would appear that I was wrong. And anyway, it was three years ago now and it hardly matters anymore.”

“The fact that you are clearly affected by it suggests to me that it *does* matter. And I could see that it mattered to the Duke also.”

“Aunt Gwendolyn, I can assure you that I do not matter very much the Duke. I was nothing more than an amusement to him, one that only

lasted as long as it took him to find somebody else.”

“Somebody else?”

“James Harrington disappeared without trace. One moment he was a regular visitor to Thurlow Manor and Hanover Hall and the next, he was gone. No explanation, no letter of apology, nothing. He just disappeared, retreating back to the west of the county never to return. Yesterday was the first time I have set eyes on him since those days and I must admit that I was very shocked by it. If I embarrassed you in any way with Lady Elton, Gwendolyn, I truly am very sorry. But please understand that my feelings had been incredibly hurt in years gone by and the shock of seeing him standing there before me was very great.”

“Let us be very clear about something, Charlotte. You have nothing to apologize for and you most certainly did not embarrass me in front of Lady Elton.” Gwendolyn reached out for the pot to replenish her tea and smiled warmly at Charlotte. “But who did he reject you in favor of?” Gwendolyn squinted as if confused.

“I have no idea.”

“I ask because that young man has not been linked to any lady for many years that I know of.”

“He has not?” Charlotte realized immediately that she felt relieved.

Not simply relieved that she had not been rejected in favor of somebody else all those years ago, but relieved that he was still unmarried.

Of all the things in the world, she would not have wanted to feel that, but she was unable to stop it. It was a reaction that had a life of its own and there was nothing she could do about it.

But there lay the pathway to pain, of that much Charlotte was certain, and even if she could not entirely master her feelings on the subject, she could certainly control her own actions.

“No, it has been quite the talk of many a drawing room. After all, he is extraordinarily handsome and yet he has shown no interest at all in any young lady. Rumor has it that his father tried very hard to have him settle upon somebody, but he would not do it. I believe it led to a great deal of consternation between the two of them, a certain amount of exasperation on the old Duke’s part.”

“I see.” Charlotte said slowly.

“So perhaps it was something else entirely?”

“Yes, perhaps it was,” Charlotte said, realizing that she had a very

good idea what. "Perhaps it was his little game after all."

"Little game?" Gwendolyn looked perplexed.

"I suppose I was a little standoffish with James Harrington when we first met, and he came to see me as something of a challenge."

"Indeed?" Gwendolyn gave a knowing smile as if the idea was not entirely foreign to her.

"I resisted for some time, but my feelings grew, and I felt certain that his did also. In the end, I chose to trust not only my own feelings, but his also and allowed myself to fall in love with him. Perhaps when he realized it, that was when his victory was complete, and he had no further use of me."

"I am bound to say that *that* is a dreadfully cynical assumption, Charlotte."

"I cannot think of any other reason for his sudden departure. What else could cause him to cease all contact without any explanation whatsoever?"

"I suppose it could be anything at all," Gwendolyn said cautiously. "But perhaps you will never know if you do not ask."

“Perhaps,” Charlotte said quietly. “But I decided long ago that I would never look back. It was a shock to see him yesterday, yes, but I shall not allow that to affect me and my judgment. I feel I can admit to you, Aunt Gwendolyn, that I really did feel so very dreadful at the time and I have vowed never, ever to repeat that experience. Not with the Duke of Sandford, and not with any man.”

“But surely there can be no harm in reading his letter and seeing what it is he has to say.”

“No, I suppose not.” Charlotte said, even though she did not truly believe it.

“Do not look so disquieted, Charlotte, for I do not expect you to open it in front of me and read it now. I simply meant for you to read it when you have a moment alone. It might answer some questions for you, or it might simply allow you to move on just as you had hoped to.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Perhaps even Ruth would sit with you whilst you read it.” Gwendolyn said, and Charlotte was suddenly touched.

Her aunt had perceived the strong friendship between mistress and maid and had seemingly understood it; certainly, she had not poured

any scorn on it. And it was true, if that letter was ever going to be read, it would surely be read in the presence of her beloved Ruth.

“Yes, I am sure that she shall.” Charlotte said gratefully. “Thank you, Aunt Gwendolyn. Thank you for listening.”

“I am available any time you need me.” Gwendolyn said and finally began to serve herself some breakfast from the many dishes.

“I think your aunt is right, Miss. I think you should read it.” Ruth said just an hour later when the two of them were sitting side-by-side on Charlotte’s bed. “After all, can it really be any more shocking than seeing him in the flesh yesterday?”

“No, when you put it like that, I suppose it cannot.” Charlotte laughed at Ruth’s ever-present practicality. “How is it that you always have the answer?”

“Many years of practice, Miss.” Ruth said and both women laughed.

“Well, I shall read it then. I shall read it out and see what you think to it.” Charlotte reached into her pocket and pulled out the letter.

She gently broke the wax seal and flattened out the smooth, heavy

paper. She stared at the words without reading them, just becoming familiar once again with the shape of his lettering, the forward flow and gentle swirls of his handwriting.

“My Dear Charlotte,

I hope you will forgive the informality of my address, but that is how I shall always remember you. We had reached that point of informality, had we not? I know we have been these three years apart, but I would hope that we are somehow able to forego a return to introductions, formalities.

But, of course, I realize that you might very well be angry with me and, in truth, I know you have a right to it.

For me to step out of your life three years ago without any explanation whatsoever must have been dreadfully difficult for you, and I know it was almost impossible for me. It is not an easy thing to explain in a letter and I hope that you will, one day, consent to hear me out in person. Perhaps even one day soon, for I know I should very much like to see you and speak to you again.

Suffice it to say that my father played a very great hand in keeping us apart and it might come as no surprise to you to know that he was an extraordinarily powerful man in some respects. He was most determined that I finally marry a woman of his choosing, one whose father had access to great funds, although I am pleased to report that I resisted that

particular want of his at all costs.

But I am afraid that one of those costs was our growing regard for one another, and it is something that I have regretted every day since, although I could see no way of overcoming it until now.

You will be aware, I am sure, that my father has lately passed away and, whilst we were reconciled at the very end and he apologized for his behavior, it is true to say that I do not mourn him. As hard as that might sound, we were never in sympathy with one another and I found it very difficult to forgive him for the interference which caused me so much pain.

But I have forgiven him in the end, for I see it is the only way to move forward in this world. And I should very much like to move forward with you now, Charlotte. I know that this must all seem very sudden to you, but I am bound to say that it is something which has played on my mind daily since the last time I saw you at Lord Morley's ball. That was a most special night to me and one that I have never forgotten.

I do not know how long you are intending to be in this part of the world, but I should very much like to see you whilst you are here. And even when you return, I am now free to make my own decisions entirely and shall once again become a regular visitor to Hanover Hall. I would be very glad if you would at least consider us friends once again.

At the end of the week, I am to attend a garden party at the home of

Colonel Fitzroy-Martin. I understand that you and your aunt are also invited, and I live in great hopes of seeing you there.

Of course, if you choose not to attend, I shall understand it entirely. But as much as I shall understand it, I will find it very hard to give up on you now that I have seen you again.

Perhaps I have already said too much in a letter and shall leave the rest to be said when we two are together again.

In the meantime, take the greatest care of yourself.

With the fondest regards,

James.”

“But what you think, Miss?” Ruth began to speak the very moment that Charlotte had finished reading the letter aloud.

“I hardly know what to think. It is not an explanation, is it? Surely his father was not so powerful that James could not at least send me a final letter three years ago. No, I am not inclined to forgive him as he has been inclined to forgive his father.”

“But perhaps he has things to say that he could not set out in a letter.” Ruth said hopefully.

“Ruth, you are still the romantic. I wish I had a heart as open as yours, but I do not. A wall came up around it when James hurt me, and I cannot see an easy way to break it down.”

“But will you go to the garden party now that you know he is going?”

“Yes, I will most certainly go to the garden party.”

“So, you *will* speak to him, then?” Ruth’s bright blue eyes looked brighter still.

“No, I am only going because Marcus Hillington is to attend.”

“Marcus Hillington?” Ruth said, and her mouth fell open as she stared at her mistress in disbelief. “But as you described him to me, Miss, you have no regard for him whatsoever. He was dull, was he not? And not particularly interested himself?”

“Exactly,” Charlotte said firmly. “A man of good sense and reasonable wealth. A man I could never be hurt by because I could never fall in love with him. The very man I have been seeking these last three years.”

“You cannot mean it,” Ruth said plaintively. “Not now, not when there is a chance for you and James Harrington after all.”

“My dear Ruth, I mean it now more than ever. Mr. Hillington has appeared in my world at just the right time.” Charlotte said and rose to her feet before carelessly tossing the Duke of Sandford’s letter onto her nightstand.

Chapter 27

“Are you very well acquainted with Colonel Fitzroy-Martin, Miss Cunningham?” Marcus Hillington said as he looked away from her entirely.

Had it not been for the use of her name, Charlotte would have wondered if he had directed the question at her at all. No doubt she had made him a little uneasy with her immediate presence the moment she had arrived in the sunlit and beautifully fragrant gardens of Colonel Fitzroy-Martin.

Charlotte had not looked for James at all, not wanting to see him there and have him think that she was in any way amenable to a discussion with him following his letter.

She really had only attended so that she might continue to set her sights upon one of the dullest men in all of England.

Marcus Hillington was neither handsome nor ill-favored; his features were all very neat, symmetrical, and very much in the right place. His hair was neither thick nor thin, neither too blonde nor too dark, he was of medium height, medium weight, medium *everything*.

And Charlotte had not been with him above ten minutes in Lady

Elton's drawing room before she realized that he was not dull because he lacked the confidence of something to say, but rather by design. The fact of the matter was that Marcus Hillington had very little interest in the lives of others, and he did nothing to disguise it.

Charlotte was sure that there were many other people who felt as he did but had just enough care for the opinions of others that they at least did something to try to hide it.

Well, at least she would never be surprised by Marcus Hillington. She could already see exactly what sort of man he was, and she was as sure as she could be that she would not one day wake up to discover that he was somebody else altogether, a man of a very different character.

"No, I am not at all acquainted with Colonel Fitzroy-Martin, Mr. Hillington. In fact, I am not acquainted with anybody particularly in this part of the county. I live over in the very far eastern corner, if you will, and my acquaintances are very different."

"And why are you here?" He said, and Charlotte was a little taken aback.

"Here at the garden party, Sir?"

"No, not here at the garden party, after all, I assume you are invited."

He said and looked nonplussed. "I mean why are you here in the south of the county?"

"As I said before, Sir, I am visiting my aunt, Mrs. Gwendolen Dearborn."

"Oh yes, of course." He said and shrugged, seeming not at all embarrassed that something she had previously told him had already slipped his mind.

"And what of you, Mr. Hillington? Did you arrive here at the garden party in company?"

"No, I came here alone." He said and turned to squint at her thoughtfully. "I am not married, Miss Cunningham, nor do I have a vast circle of friends." He said by way of explanation. "But I have enough acquaintances that I am able to come out into society."

"And do you enjoy it?"

"I enjoy playing bridge, that much is true. But I cannot say that I particularly enjoy purely social occasions, such as these." He looked all around the garden as if to demonstrate.

"Then why come?" Charlotte realized that she had started to speak a little like Mr. Hillington himself.

She had become abrupt and very practical and was not entirely sure that she did not enjoy it just a little. It seemed simpler somehow to be so very direct and she wondered if that was why Marcus Hillington favored such an approach.

“Because I had hoped to speak to Colonel Fitzroy-Martin about a particular investment. Once he has settled his guests admirably, I am sure I shall be able to have a few minutes with him.”

“Oh, I see.”

Charlotte was pleased to discover that she did not feel at all offended by his honesty, but then why would she? After all, she had not one ounce of feeling for the man and the object of the exercise was to find herself in the company of a man who felt exactly the same way about her.

However, she could not help but compare their conversation to so many others she had had in the past with James. Every conversation with him had seemed like a jousting tournament, something for which one had to maintain focus.

There was none of the same excitement in conversation with Marcus Hillington, and Charlotte knew there likely never would be. And even though that was the point entirely, Charlotte felt suddenly very low.

“Ah, there he is now.” Marcus Hillington said as he stared across the garden to the approaching colonel. “If you would excuse me, Miss Cunningham?” He continued without even looking at her or waiting for her response; Marcus Hillington simply set off across the lawn, likely forgetting Charlotte before he had taken three steps.

Charlotte had to admit that she felt somewhat abandoned in that moment and looked all around her for any sign of her aunt. But Gwendolyn was nowhere to be seen and Charlotte thought it very likely that she was admiring some far-flung part of the gardens with dear Lady Elton.

Suddenly she began to feel a little conspicuous, not knowing anybody around her and certainly not wanting to come face-to-face with James Harrington.

Charlotte took a deep breath and began to walk with purpose towards a sunken rose garden. At least she would find somewhere to sit and have a hope of being afforded a little privacy whilst she gathered her thoughts.

Stepping down into the sunken rose garden was like stepping into another little world altogether. Roses grew up here there and everywhere, trailing roses clinging to trellis-work as if their very existence depended upon it, somehow forming what felt like

impenetrable walls of shining, green leaves and soft petals of every color.

There was a long stone bench at the far end of the rose garden and Charlotte hurriedly made her way to it. She sat down with a great sigh and wondered if she could simply remain there for the rest of the afternoon, peering out now and again for any sign of her Aunt Gwendolyn.

As much as she liked the idea of Marcus Hillington, the very idea she could marry without fear of hurt and have a suitable father for the children she would love more than life itself, she found his noncommittal type of conversation very trying.

It seemed that such sparse and to the point conversation was somehow more tiring than its livelier opposite and Charlotte wondered how that could possibly be the case.

Perhaps it was simply because she was not used to it. But, in the end, Charlotte was certain that she could get used to anything if she knew it to be in her own best interests.

She drew in a deep breath and tilted her head back, squinting into the bright blue sky and feeling the warm sun on her skin. She would take a little rest there before renewing her efforts with Marcus Hillington. Charlotte was not about to give up on the little plan she had decided

upon three years before. If she found Marcus Hillington's dull conversation tiring, she would just have to get used to it.

James watched her walk across the lawn towards the sunken rose garden knowing that he would, in the end, follow her. But he thought he would at least give her a few moments to herself before making his way over and peering into see if she was alone.

He thought it strange that every moment he waited on that lawn in the warm sunshine for the right moment to go to her felt like an eternity. How he had managed the last three years without her, he could not say.

When he finally made his way across the lawn and peered down into the sunken garden, James could see that Charlotte was sitting entirely alone. He walked down the stone steps and, on reaching the bottom, tactfully cleared his throat to alert her to his presence.

"Charlotte?" He said, his voice thick with the emotion of three years grieving.

"I had wanted a few moments alone, Sir." She said brashly and he realized immediately that her attendance at the garden party was not in any way indicative of her fond feelings towards him.

Perhaps he ought to have realized that when he searched the garden for her only to discover her in the company of Marcus Hillington once again. No doubt that man was the reason for her attendance and yet James could not quite believe it. Something did not ring true.

“And I would not wish to intrude upon your solitude, but I should very much like to speak to you.”

“Yes, you said so in your letter.” Charlotte snapped. “But I cannot imagine that anything you have to say now will be of great interest to me. Forgive me, but it has been rather a long time and I am bound to tell you that everything has changed.”

“Everything? So, you have no feelings for me whatsoever?” He said and took a few more tentative steps in her direction.

Charlotte looked so beautiful that James could have rushed to her, dropped to his knees, and begged her forgiveness there and then. She was wearing an ivory gown with a dark green velvet band at the Empire line. It was a simple gown but, as always, the color suited her skin and shining red hair and the gown itself displayed her soft curves to best advantage.

“I do not see where conversation of this nature gets us, Your Grace.”

“Your Grace? That is who I am to you now, is it?”

“Well, you are the Duke of Sandford, are you not? How else is one to address the Duke?”

“You used to call me James?”

“And *you* used to respond to my letters.” She said bitterly.

“I can see that you are angry with me, and as I have said before you have a right to it. But you have yet to tell me that you have no feelings for me whatsoever. Perhaps if that was the case, you would not be so angry now.”

“Please do not presume to know how it is I feel, for you do not.”

“And please do not tell me that you have any regard whatsoever for that dreary man you have taken to following everywhere.” James could feel his annoyance rising and yet he knew he must keep it in check.

In the end, he was simply the man who had broken her heart and, despite the fact that he knew he had the very best of reasons, he would have to accept that Charlotte would never know it. And without the truth, why on earth would she ever forgive him?

“Where I go and who I speak to is none of your concern.” She said but it was clear he had embarrassed her for her cheeks were suddenly burning. “And I am not *following* Mr. Hillington anywhere.”

“Then please accept my condolences on the misfortune of perpetually finding yourself in dull conversation with the man. Forgive me, for it is clear I have the whole thing upside down.” James chuckled in the hope that a return to their old way of doing things might spark some fonder memories within her.

“I am not interested in your clever turn of phrase.” Charlotte rose to her feet and it was clear that she intended to leave the rose garden. “Nor am I interested in your opinions of Mr. Hillington or even myself.”

“And you are not interested to hear the reasons why I could not see you? You do not want to know any of it?” For an awful moment, James thought that he would assuage her anger with a little of his own.

What if he told her the truth? What if he made it clear that he had broken her heart and his own simply to protect her? Where would her bitterness go then? What would she have to say to him?

But no, he knew he could not do it. Whatever explanation he gave, if she allowed him to give one, could be no more than a repeat of the

idea that his father had intervened and made it impossible for him to continue to court her.

And, in the end, what sort of explanation was that?

“No, I do not want to hear any of it. I asked for the reasons three years ago you chosen not to give them. You chose then, in fact, not to say anything at all. And so, I think you will understand why it is that I have long since stopped wondering and no longer care.” As she walked hurriedly by him, James reached out and took her arm quite reflexively. “No, let me go.” She said and turned her bright blue eyes on him angrily.

In the end, James could do no more than simply release her. But this would not be the end of it; it could not be the end. He would have to find some way to reach her because he knew he could not go on without her.

If the last three years were hard without seeing her, they could not compare to the pain of having her there in front of him and knowing that she might never be his.

No, now was not yet the time to give up.

Chapter 28

“I was thinking that I would send an invitation over to Mr. Hillington to come here for afternoon tea. I am sure that Aunt Gwendolyn would not mind at all but I suppose I really ought to ask first.” Charlotte said as she and Ruth walked arm in arm through the woodland about a mile and a half from Hawthorn Manor.

Charlotte could see the woodland from her chamber window and had determined that she would make a point of visiting it during her stay. And it really was very welcome indeed because the shade of the trees provided a cool retreat from the warmth of the day. And the scent of the bark, flora, and fauna did much to revive her.

“You must do as you see fit, Miss.” Ruth said with an air of resignation.

“Oh Ruth, are you cross with me?” Charlotte said and felt her heart sinking.

“Goodness, I am not cross with you, Miss. What sort of lady’s maid becomes cross with her mistress? No, I am not cross. I could not be cross.” As Ruth finished, Charlotte could hear a tremor in her voice and feared that her friend was about to cry.

“Forgive me, I did not mean to hurt you, my dear,” Ruth said and let go of her hand so that she might take her arm instead. She turned Ruth gently until they were face to face. “I would not hurt you for the world.”

“You have not hurt me, Miss, I am just concerned for you. I do wish you would let go of your ideas about Marcus Hillington for I am certain that you would never be happy. And that is what hurts me, not anything you have done or said, just the idea that you are about to walk headlong into unhappiness.”

“Then perhaps I shall not invite him for afternoon tea just yet. Perhaps I shall wait until I am certain that I will be happy with him.” Charlotte said, selfishly wishing that she did not have to make such a concession for she knew it would simply put her plan back days if not weeks.

Still, she was sure that a man like Marcus Hillington could simply be approached from a practical standpoint. Perhaps he did not particularly need afternoon tea and coy conversation.

Of course, Mr. Hillington had never given any indication at all that he was interested in her, but Charlotte suspected that, given a hundred years, he would never manage that. But it did not mean that he could not be manipulated into thinking about children, a fine son to inherit all the money he had so cleverly made. Even the dullest of men, the most uncommunicative, still had that instinctive pride and a need for

longevity down the generations.

At that moment, Charlotte's attention was drawn by the sound of a dry twig snapping. She had that instant sensation that they were not alone and turned sharply to look all around her.

"Forgive me for startling you, Miss Cunningham." Rounding a bend in the path was none other than James Harrington and Charlotte did not know if she was startled or furious.

"I am not startled, Your Grace." Charlotte said angrily.

"Well, how nice it is to see you again." He said and shrugged.

"I believe you are here by design, Sir, and I am not at all pleased by it." Charlotte said and heard Ruth gasp.

"There is little point then in doing anything other than continuing on my way, is there not?" He said flatly, and Charlotte found herself just a little upended.

For some reason, she had expected him to object, to try to keep her there and speak to her longer. She had not expected to feel let down by the fact that he had not. After all, she had made it very clear that she wanted nothing more to do with him and so the fact that he might come to accept that one day ought not to disturb her. After all, was

that not what she wanted?

“None at all.” Charlotte said, hardly knowing which of her emotions was having the greatest effect on her.

However, she knew she could not give into any of it and so she turned smartly on her heel to walk away in the other direction, fully determined not to stop marching until she had reached her chamber at Hawthorn Manor.

She had been so determined, so very decisive, that she did not even notice that she had walked away and left Ruth behind.

“Forgive me, Miss Clarkin, I did not mean to make you feel uncomfortable. I did not mean to make your mistress angry either, but it appears that I have done just that.” James blew out a great puff of air and knew that he ought not to be talking in such a way to a lady’s maid. And yet there was something about the young woman which made him drop his guard a little.

“There is nothing to forgive, Your Grace. I am not at all uncomfortable, just concerned.”

“It is only right that you be concerned for your mistress, Miss Clarkin.

And please know that I would not hurt her willingly. Not then, not now, not ever.” He said and wondered what on earth she must think of him.

Ruth Clarkin was an unusual woman in many respects. Even though she was not a lady’s maid by birth, exactly, *she* did not know that. And yet there was an intelligence about her, a confidence. She did not seem to bow and crouch in this world, but neither did she thrust back her shoulders and walk arrogantly through it. She simply seemed content to occupy her own space and he wondered if that was an inherent knowledge that she was different.

Even without knowing the facts, perhaps she was instinctively aware that all was not as it seemed. He studied her for a moment and wondered if he would see any similarity between Ruth Clarkin and her half-sister, Charlotte.

Ruth was not as pale in her complexion as Charlotte, and her hair was blonde. Perhaps it was the very difference in their hair, the fact that Charlotte’s was so red, that disguised the similarities.

It occurred to James that as he studied Ruth her eyes seem to jump out at him. They were blue, just like Charlotte’s, with a tendency to widen with emotion. And he thought her nose and the shape of her face generally were similar enough for sisterhood to be seen.

He shook his head a little when he realized Ruth Clarkin was studying him with a mixture of curiosity and confusion. He knew he would have to say something, but what on earth could he say to this young woman whose origins he knew whilst she herself did not?

“I believe you, Your Grace.” She said suddenly, taking him aback. “I do not know what happened or why, but I believe what you are telling me now.”

“I would never hurt her, not willingly.”

“Forgive me for being so bold, Your Grace, especially when it is not my place to be so.” She began quietly and yet there was a confidence about her that he could not help but respect. “But whatever it is that caused the two of you to part three years ago, would it not simply be better if you told Miss Cunningham the truth?”

“I do not think I can, Miss Clarkin. It can only hurt her, and I would never want to do that.”

“But this is hurting her too. In the end, I suppose it is just a case of what hurts the most, is it not?”

“She does not seem particularly hurt anymore, but rather angry. And I do not blame her for being angry, I just cannot now see the point in hurting her for the sake of it. She has made it very clear that she no

longer feels for me what she once did and I cannot help but think that for me to tell her the reasons for my sudden disappearance in the first place would be nothing more than an unwitting act of revenge for the fact that she no longer cares for me.”

“I cannot agree with you, Your Grace. Please forgive my forward manner, Sir, but I am certain that my mistress *is* hurting.” Ruth Clarkin looked over her shoulder at the departing figure of her mistress who, intent on forward motion, had clearly not yet noticed that her maid was not by her side.

“Forgive my intrusion, for it is most inappropriate, but I beg of you, tell me, has she said as much to you? I know that the two of you are very close and that she values your friendship and your opinion more than anyone in the world.” He paused and knew that he had already said too much and that to say any more could not possibly hurt things any further. “If only I could know that she still cared for me, then I would at least have hope. I would at least have a reason for continuing otherwise, I think I must desist and accept that the two of us were never meant to be together.”

“She has not said as much, Your Grace, but she does not need to. As you have already said, Sir, we are great friends and I know my mistress very well indeed. I even know what is in her heart and that is why it grieves me so every time she tells me of her intention to never marry for love. It truly gives me pain, the idea that such a fine young

woman would resign herself to a life of dull misery simply to avoid ever feeling that same stab of pain again.”

“She was very hurt, was she not, when I ceased all contact between us?” James said guiltily.

“Yes, Your Grace, she was extraordinarily hurt. She is a very strong woman, one who would not let others see her distress very easily, but I could see it.”

“You are a very good friend to her.”

“And Miss Cunningham is a very good friend to me.”

“Then forgive me for asking, Miss Clarkin, but is your mistress intent in some way upon Marcus Hillington?” He knew that he had overstepped the bounds and yet he was certain that he would never have such an opportunity again.

He had to get as much information as he could out of Ruth Clarkin before she disappeared after her mistress; this might be their one and only conversation, after all.

“Ordinarily I would never break her confidence Your Grace but yes, she is most determined. And only because he is a man of very flat character, one who has as little interest in her she has in him.” Ruth

paused and blinked furiously, and James could see her bright blue eyes shining with distress. “She is most determined never to be vulnerable again, Sir. She does not want to love, you see, she does not want to feel the pain when that love is rescinded.”

“I wish there was some way for me to tell her that my love was *never* rescinded. All that has happened is that it has grown and grown as the years have passed.”

“Your Grace, I have only a few moments before I must run up to my mistress. She is some distance from me now and she will quickly realize that I am not with her.”

“I understand, Miss Clarkin,” James said and had the awful feeling of fine sand slipping through his fingers. He needed to do something, to say something that would count, something that would find its way to Charlotte ears and change the whole landscape. “I wish there was some way for me to tell Charlotte that I have always loved her and I always shall, but she will not hear me, Miss Clarkin. Whether I write or present myself to her in person, Charlotte is dead set against me and I do not know how to make her stand still for long enough to hear me out.”

“Your Grace, you cannot simply repeat the fact that your father’s intervention wrenched the two of you apart, for it is not enough. I am afraid that, in the end, the only thing that will do is the absolute truth,

whatever it is.”

“Even if it is so painful?”

“Is it really worth spending the rest of your life in this manner, Your Grace? And is it really worth forcing my beloved mistress into a long and very loveless marriage? For I fear that if you do not do something soon, Sir, that is what we shall all be faced with. And once Miss Cunningham has made those vows, there will be no going back. That is what you must consider, Sir. I understand that the truth might be painful, whatever it is, but the truth often is, is it not?”

“Yes, I daresay more often than not.” He said thoughtfully and wondered at the wisdom of the young servant.

But perhaps it was not just the wisdom which had affected him so, but rather the caring that he could see in Ruth Clarkin’s eyes. They really were as sisters, even if they did not know it. In the end, would it really be so very bad for them to have something they had likely always felt truly confirmed?

“Forgive me, Your Grace, but I must beg that you release me now.” Ruth said nervously.

“Yes, of course, Miss Clarkin. And thank you. Thank you for everything.” He said, and she nodded before turning to run after her

mistress.

As James turned to walk back in the direction from which he had come, he wondered if the day had truly turned out to be the disaster that it appeared to be. After all, Ruth Clarkin had certainly given him something to think about.

For one thing, it was clear that Charlotte still had feelings for him, however angrily she would try to deny them. For another, it was clear that Charlotte would not act on those feelings without more from him.

But could he really tell her the truth that he had kept from her so long? The very reason that the two of them had parted in the first place would surely count for nothing if he did that.

But what of a life spent without her? What of a life seeing her living in the south of the county with a man she did not love? And it would not fortify him to know that she did not love him, for Marcus Hillington would be her husband and James would not.

He quickened his pace, keen to be home so that he might think the whole thing through and come to a decision at last.

Chapter 29

“I must admit, I am inclined to agree with the maid, my dear fellow.” Hector said and shifted in the wrought iron seat on the terrace at Sandford Hall.

When James had returned from his encounter with Charlotte and Ruth in the woodland, he had been fortified to discover that his dear friend was on his way. Hector had become an ever more regular guest at Sandford since the old Duke had died and James was pleased that he made no bones of the fact that he much preferred the place without Richard Harrington in situ.

James found himself pleased by the idea of having somebody with whom he could discuss the whole thing. And at least Hector had some knowledge of it, after all. In truth, besides himself and the awful Charles Holt, Hector knew more than anybody.

But still Hector did not know the details, the very crux of the thing, and James was relieved that his old friend had never asked. But that was Hector to a fault. James had asked him to make no more questions and Hector had simply agreed.

“That I should tell Charlotte the truth? The very thing that I have been trying to protect her from these last three years?”

“It strikes me that you do not have another course of action, beyond forgetting the whole thing altogether and leaving Charlotte to her anger and you to the desperately sad knowledge that you could have done something about it.”

“But you do not know the severity of the thing I have been hiding.”

“And I never do want to know it,” Hector said and held a palm out in front of him for a moment before reaching to lift his teacup. “I say, is it too early for something a little stronger?”

“It most certainly is, Hector. We have only just finished breakfast.” James said and laughed. “And I do not know how you manage it for after last night’s indulgence, I cannot even think to take a sip of sherry, never mind brandy.”

The two men had, as was their custom, enjoyed themselves heartily when Hector had arrived the previous evening. James, hoping for the briefest respite from his own cares and feelings, decided to mention nothing of Charlotte to Hector until the following day. He wanted simply that the two of them have a very fine evening and relax entirely.

And once again, Hector had said nothing. Likely sensing his friend’s aversion to the subject for a while, he happily played along as the two

of them planned a lengthy visit from Hector's father at some point in the future, discussing what they would do and where they would take the aging gentleman.

"Very well, I shall suffer this tea." Hector said and chuckled.

"You might as well, for it seems you have already suffered almost *all* of the sandwiches." James complained and the two of them laughed.

"And very lovely they were too." Hector turned in his seat to face James. "So, you need to make a move of some kind and you need to make it soon. I must admit that I agree with this *Miss Clarkin* in so far as I should not like to see my young cousin married to somebody who is as dull as you claim Marcus Hillington to be. Really, nobody deserves a life married to a dull person. Just imagine it."

"And yet I think Charlotte is determined enough to go through with the thing."

"If this dull man will have her." Hector shrugged.

"As dull as he is, I cannot think him either blind or stupid. What man in his right mind would avoid the attention of such a beautiful woman as Charlotte? Especially when he is unlikely to have received very much feminine attention in the past."

“You are perhaps filling in the gaps with your own version of things, my friend.”

“But I cannot afford to be complacent. I cannot afford to assume that she will not marry Marcus Hillington, that he will not have her. I have to work from the assumption that, if I do nothing, the dreadful thing will go ahead.”

“Then we are back to the beginning, James. We are back to the clever maid’s assertion that you must, if you wish to have the beautiful Charlotte, tell the absolute truth.”

“But there is more to think about. There are more people to consider than simply Charlotte.” He said, thinking of her father and the wise, pretty Ruth Clarkin.

Could he really turn their worlds upside down simply to secure his own happiness? But if he did not, could he live with such sadness? Why was it that every choice seemed to end in pain without a hint of an assured happiness either way?

“How trustworthy is this little maid?” Hector said and changed the direction of the conversation somehow.

“I think she is Charlotte’s only true confidant.”

“Well, Charlotte is a very good judge of character, it has to be said, so if she is prepared to tell her own secrets to this maid and nobody else, then I think it is a fair assumption that Miss Clarkin can be trusted.”

“So? What of it?”

“It seems to me that Miss Clarkin has been able to give you more information about Charlotte than anybody else could have, possibly even dear old Lucas himself. So, who better to secretly tell the truth to, do you not think?”

“You mean I should tell Miss Clarkin the secret that I have been holding onto for three years?”

“Yes.”

“But why?”

“Because it seems that she knows my cousin better than anybody and she is the only person on earth who will have an idea how Charlotte would react to it if she heard it herself. Do you not think that Miss Clarkin could tell you definitively whether you should tell the truth to her mistress or simply leave things as they are?”

“Yes, I suppose there is something in what you say.” James said, thinking that it would be a very fine idea indeed if Miss Clarkin

herself was not about to be upended by the truth.

And yet, did he really have a choice? Ruth Clarkin was already upset by the idea that her mistress would determine to make her own life unhappy. Could he justify the whole thing on those grounds? Could he upset Ruth like that in the hope that everything really would work out in the end?

“I think you should try it.” Hector said firmly.

“I am beginning to think that I do not have a choice.” James said and stared off across the immaculately trimmed lawns of Sanford Hall.

James set off early the next morning, safe in the knowledge that Hector would still be comfortably snoring in his bed by the time he returned. But he also knew the workings of a house, even a little manor house such as Hawthorn, and he knew that the servants would now be awake whilst the rest of the house remained asleep.

If he was to have any hope of speaking to Ruth Clarkin privately again, it would only be under such circumstances. And he knew that he only had one opportunity of it, for he did not want to raise suspicion amongst the other servants should they see him making his approach.

No, attending Hawthorn Manor in such a secretive way would be something that James could only do once. He would have to make it count.

The grounds of Hawthorn Manor were not particularly big, although he was able to tether his horse out of sight on its very edges. He walked through the trees in the hopes that nobody looked down on him from a window above, for he could not risk discovery.

He took things slowly, stopping here and there to catch his breath behind one of the thick hawthorns for which the house had undoubtedly taken its name. The gardens were rather rambling, and he was pleased that there was much by way of established shrubbery and foliage behind which he could take cover.

He made his way to the rear of the house, hoping to see the servants' entrance. Secreted behind yet another hawthorn, James was pleased to see that the door was open.

Perhaps he could get a little closer and peer inside in the hopes of catching a glimpse of Ruth Clarkin. After all, Hawthorn Manor was not a large house and he doubted that the servants were plentiful.

Of course, the closer he got to the house, the more he risked discovery and either having to explain himself or ask for Ruth Clarkin by name,

only for her mistress to hear of it later from a nosy servant of the Hawthorn household.

As he stood in an agony of indecision, however, his thoughtfulness and patience were rewarded when Ruth Clarkin herself walked out of the servants' door and across the little courtyard. She was holding a teacup without a saucer and he watched as she settled herself down on a low retaining wall to enjoy a little solitude.

It was now or never; if he approached that young woman, it could only be to tell her everything. James felt his stomach lurch at the idea of it; the finality of it all.

When he finally started moving in her direction, he could hardly believe it. He was sure that he had not made that determination, and it was as if he was nothing more than a puppet and somebody far above him was pulling his strings, making him walk.

And he had barely finished that thought when he realized that he was out in the open and Ruth Clarkin was staring at him open-mouthed.

"Your Grace?" She said in a loud whisper, her eyebrows arched high as she tentatively rose to her feet.

"Forgive me for coming upon you so early, my dear woman, but it is imperative that I speak with you. I wanted to see you before the rest

of the household was up, I hope you do not mind.” He said and turned to look back towards the cover of the thick hawthorns in hopes that she would follow him that way.

Without a word, that clever young woman walked smartly from the courtyard, across the lawn, and into the cover of the thick foliage. She was still carrying her teacup and she looked at it doubtfully when she remembered its presence.

“I am sorry, Your Grace. I really had not expected to see you here.”

“You have nothing to apologize for, Miss Clarkin. In fact, I rather think that I do. Or at least I will, in the end.”

“I am afraid I do not understand.” Ruth said and tipped her head to one side, her bright blue eyes studying his face intently.

“You were right yesterday when you said that I had a truth to tell, that there was something more to it all than simply my father’s interference. You perceived that there is a greater secret behind my disappearance from Miss Cunningham’s life.”

“I would not wish to force you into something, Your Grace, but I cannot see a way around it. All I care about is my mistress’ happiness, for she is so dear to me. If there is anything that you can do to stop her running head-first into disaster, I would be eternally grateful to

you, whatever it is that you have to say.”

“Even if that very thing concerns you yourself, Miss Clarkin? Even if what I say in the next few moments might take your very vision of your own world and tear it asunder in front of you?”

“But what has it to do with me?” Ruth said and looked a little afraid.

“Forgive me, I cannot.” James said and turned to leave.

“Your Grace, please wait,” Ruth said, and he turned to see that she had begun to follow him. “As I said to you before, whatever it is you have to say, I shall be grateful to you for saying it.” She nodded vigorously, bravely even, and he knew the moment had come.

“Miss Clarkin, if I continue with this, please know that it very likely affects you more than anybody.”

“I see.” She said continued to nod.

“You permit me to continue?”

“Yes, Your Grace.” She said in such a quiet voice she almost sounded like a child.

Could he really do this? The woman looked at him with a mixture of

fear and curiosity, so much so that he knew she would never settle anyway, even if he did not tell her everything he had to say. He had, perhaps, stepped over the point of no return.

“Miss Clarkin, when my father discovered of my courtship of Miss Cunningham, he was absolutely furious. unknown to me, he set his attorney, a vile man, to unearth whatever little scandal he could that would see to it I could not marry your mistress.”

“Oh dear.” Ruth said, and he almost laughed; she sounded suddenly so openly disparaging of the old Duke that he thought he saw her true mettle then and he rather wondered if were his father alive and standing before them now, Ruth Clarkin might very well tear strips off him for what he had done.

“And I am afraid that he was able to find something that your mistress was not aware of. Something that, if she discovered it, might disrupt the friendship she has with her father irreparably. And he is such a nice man, is he not?”

“The Baron is a very fine man, Sir.” Ruth said, and her eyes began to fill with tears before she even knew what hurt might be done to him.

“Worse still, my father threatened to have this piece of gossip spread everywhere so that everybody in society might know of it, thereby hurting not only Charlotte and her father but you also.”

“Me?” Ruth said and nodded as if to hurry him along.

“In the end, Miss Clarkin, my father’s attorney found his greatest source of information in a little town called Hollerton.” He said and saw how her eyes widened at the recognition of her hometown. “With your very own family, I am afraid.”

“Oh goodness, what have they done?” Ruth said, and the warmth seemed to disappear from her altogether.

“They told my father’s attorney something about you, my dear Miss Clarkin, which you might find extraordinarily painful.” James said and wondered how on earth he was going to continue.

“That I am not their child?” Ruth said simply.

“Yes,” James said and shook his head wildly from side to side. “But how did you know it? I mean, have you known it all along?”

“I did not know for certain, Your Grace, until this moment.”

“So, your mother and father, well, the *Clarkins*, they did not tell you?”

“It was not something I needed to be told, Your Grace. I felt it all along. They had no love for me and I certainly had no love for them.

And that is not a natural, Sir. We are so different, not just in terms of appearances, but I am bound to say in intellect too. I never did fit with them, you see, and I could sense their relief when the Baron came to offer me a job.”

“And can you possibly see now why it was that the Baron might have come to specifically offer *you* a job, Miss Clarkin?” James said and felt rather cowardly as he hoped to lead Ruth to the discovery without him actually having to say it.

“Yes, I can.” She said, and her face softened considerably. “I always felt so very comfortable, from the very moment I arrived at Thurlow Manor. His Lordship was always so kind and I had often wondered why it was that he chose to give me so fine a job when I had never worked a day as a maid in my life. But I was glad of it and I did not question it.”

“So, you had wondered?”

“I think sometimes we wonder without realizing it, Your Grace. I have never consciously considered my origins, but I suppose we know things that we do not *realizewe* know. I do not know if that makes sense at all, but I am bound to say that Miss Cunningham has always felt like a sister to me. We have been close from the very first and I have never been anything other than confident in our friendship and her regard of me.”

“You have taken this awfully well, my dear,” James said and reached out to lay a tentative hand on her shoulder. “I do hope I have not turned your world inside out.”

“You have done nothing of the sort, Your Grace. Although I do have one question, if I may?”

“Of course.”

“My mother?” She raised her eyebrows, her question clear.

“I am afraid that I do not know. As far as I can tell she was a member of your father’s household staff at the time, but I cannot say in what capacity. I truly am sorry.”

“I daresay there is time enough for me to discover it.” She said with a pleasant smile.

“I suppose I ought to leave in a moment, before the rest of the household is awake and your mistress... *sister*... is looking for you.” He said, feeling suddenly awkward about the young woman’s confusing status.

“And you want to know if I think you should tell her?” She said, looking at him knowingly.

“Yes, yes please.”

“In the end, I think the news will affect Miss Cunningham much more than it has myself, despite your misgivings. But her father is a good man and I think that he would put her future happiness before the keeping of any secret. It will be painful, and there will be much to come of it, but I truly believe that it is the right thing to do.”

“Then I shall do it. I shall seek her out and beg her to listen. But where? What am I to do? After all, it is not something that I can discuss with her in Lady Elton’s drawing room over a game of bridge, is it?” He laughed and was pleased to see that Ruth was also amused.

“Leave it with me, Your Grace. I shall find a way to have the two of you meet in private and in a place where my mistress can come to terms with her emotions without fear of being discovered. I shall write to you, Sir, when I have come up with something.” She looked over her shoulder then and he knew it was time to depart.

“Miss Clarkin, I cannot thank you enough.”

“And I cannot thank you enough, Your Grace. It is not every day that a person has a deep-seated feeling suddenly explained.” And with that, she was gone.

Chapter 30

“What about this pale green gown, miss? I always think it suits you very well. It goes so nicely with your hair and your skin and it fits so well.” Ruth said excitedly.

“But I am going nowhere today, Ruth. I hardly think I need to put so much effort into my appearance on a day when I am to do nothing more than wonder about the house, read, and sew.” Charlotte laughed. “Not that I am not, as always, appreciative of your care of me.”

“Not at all, Miss.” Ruth said and her cheeks were suddenly pink.

Charlotte had noted a change in Ruth in the last couple of days. She had seemed in onemoment excitable and the next distracted and Charlotte could not hazard a guess at the cause. After all, Ruth was the most sensible, level-headed person that Charlotte knew.

“Ruth, is everything alright, my dear? You seem a little out of sorts.”

“Not at all, Miss. I feel very well indeed, as a matter of fact. Very healthy and content.”

“If there was something wrong, Ruth, you would tell me, would you

not?" Charlotte had a feeling that there really was something to tell.

She hoped with all her heart that Ruth really would tell her if something was troubling her and not simply suffer in silence. After all, they were the closest of friends and Charlotte had always known that she could tell Ruth anything. But what if Ruth did not feel the same way? What if Ruth had never been able to trust her mistress with the secrets of her own heart?

Charlotte had always assumed that there was nothing for Ruth to tell, but perhaps that was not the case after all.

"Of course, I would tell you, Miss. If something was wrong, if something was upsetting me, you would be the very first person that I would come to with it. In truth, you would be the only person." Ruth seemed to calm down suddenly, appearing very much like her old self again, and Charlotte felt relieved.

"Well, I am glad to hear it. But if there is something you think I should know, do not forget that we have the house to ourselves today. When my Aunt Gwendolyn goes out after breakfast, we shall be left to our own devices until this evening. We could have a wonderful walk, could we not? And then you and I could take tea in the drawing room. What do you think to that?" Charlotte said, relishing the prospect of sitting down with her friend in the main part of the house without any of the constraints that existed between master and servant.

“I think that sounds like a very fine idea.” Ruth said and lifted down the green gown from the rail.

“So, I see you cannot be persuaded into affording me nothing more than minimal effort today?” Charlotte said and grinned as she eyed the gown.

“Well, it is such a very fine day, Miss.”

James have been unable to force down anything more substantial than tea at breakfast and, now that he was approaching Hawthorn Manor, he hoped that his stomach would not rumble and roll as he tried to speak sensibly to Charlotte.

He had received Ruth Clarkin’s brief letter the evening before and it had suddenly given him hope that perhaps things really would work out for the best. If nothing else, Miss Clarkin was a very clever young woman with an art for careful planning.

“Your Grace,

As promised, I am writing to you with details of an idea which I think might work. I have just discovered that the mistress of this house, Mrs.

Gwendolen Dearborn, is to be away from home for a good deal of tomorrow. She is due to leave after breakfast and is not set to return until the early evening.

Forgive me for presuming to present you with a plan, Sir, but I think it might be best if you arrived early. It would give Miss Cunningham the rest of the day to come to terms with her emotions before her aunt returns in the evening and, as such, I believe it would be a little fairer.

There is only one road out from here, and if you wait upon that road it will be very obvious when Mrs. Dearborn leaves. Perhaps if you wait ten minutes and then approach the house, I shall be able to wait for you by the front door and let you in without any of the other servants being aware of it. Perhaps better still if you came on foot, Your Grace.

But I shall leave the final decision to you and, should you choose in the end to say nothing to my mistress of what you told me yesterday, please know that I shall never breathe a word of it.

Sincerely,

Miss Ruth Clarkin."

James could see no reason to deviate from Ruth Clarkin's plan at all. It was simple and really very good, especially if he could be given admittance to Hawthorn Manor without anybody else knowing it.

In the end, that is exactly what happened. James waited precisely ten minutes after seeing Gwendolen Dearborn being spirited away in her small carriage before he tethered his horse once again on the very edge of the estate and made his way through the gardens on foot.

Ruth was waiting for him by the door, her bright blue eyes peeking out from the tiny crack she had it open. She peered quickly over her shoulder before silently opening the door and ushering him in, leading him this way and that until he finally arrived outside a partially open door.

Ruth knocked on the door and James heard Charlotte callout from within.

“Come in.” She said gaily.

“Miss, I have a visitor for you.”

“I did not hear anybody at the door.” Charlotte said curiously.

“No, Miss. Nobody else knows that he is here.” Ruth said and opened the door wider so that Charlotte might see the Duke of Sanford standing behind her.

“Ruth? What is this?” Charlotte said and looked upset.

“Miss Cunningham forgive me for this is the only time I have ever deceived you, the only time I have ever kept anything back from you, but I knew I must.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The Duke of Sanford has something to tell you, something very serious. I fear it is something that will upset you greatly and yet I am certain that you must hear it.”

“You want me to hear something that would hurt me?” Charlotte said and began to look betrayed.

“Please, Miss,” Ruth said and tears streamed down her face causing Charlotte to rise to her feet and embrace her maid. “Please, you must hear him out. Even if you are so angry with me that you dismiss me from your service, I truly believe that your future happiness rests upon knowing the truth.”

“Very well, but you must not cry, Ruth. And you must never, ever speak of me dismissing you for there is nothing on this earth would make do that.”

“Then I shall leave the two of you, Miss. I shall wait for you in your chamber.” Ruth said and turned to leave, looking up at James with

tear-filled eyes as she made her way out.

“What have you said to Ruth that you have upset her so?” Charlotte said thunderously the moment Ruth was out of earshot.

“If you would sit down again, Charlotte, I will tell you.”

“How could you upset her?” Charlotte went on angrily, but he knew that she was just playing for time.

James knew that Charlotte had an idea that something very big was coming and she was too afraid to look at it.

In the end, he could not blame her.

“I would not have upset her for the world, in the same way that I would never have upset you had I any other choice.”

“Well, you are here now, and I suppose you are determined to tell me.” Charlotte tried to look and sound unconcerned and, to the untrained eye, she would have succeeded.

But James knew her, he could see beyond the self-sufficiency and into the tender heart which lay underneath and it gave him such pain to know of the further hurt he was about to cause.

“The truth of the matter is that I really did turn away from you all those years ago to protect you, Charlotte.” James began, thinking it as good a place as any. In the end, he wanted to put some distance between himself and the moment at which he would change Charlotte’s world forever. “And it really was my father’s interference at the root of it all. I see you are not convinced, and never would be, and so now I am bound to tell you everything my father did to ensure that you and I were kept apart.”

“By all means.”

“Charlotte, my father was very determined that we would not marry and so he sent his attorney, a dreadful man called Charles Holt, to discover whatever he could about your own family. And I am afraid to say that he did unearth something that meant I could not be with you.”

“Why, what had I done that was so dreadful? Nothing, that is what. I can tell you that I have never done anything in my life that would make me unfit to be *anyone’s* wife, Duke or not.” Charlotte’s spat angrily.

“It is nothing like that, Charlotte. And it was not for my own protection that I turned away from you. You should know the truth that it broke my heart.” James could hear the rasping emotion in his own voice. “It broke my heart because I loved you. I love you now, I

never stopped loving you. I have lived with this every day and wish that we could simply have found a way through our differences without all of this.”

“Without all of what?” Charlotte’s cheeks were turning pink and her eyes were filling with fearful tears.

“Without telling you the truth that I sought to protect you from in the first place. But at least now I can tell it to you and know that you are still safe. For you see, my father had threatened to spread the information he had unearthed far and wide and to have you and your father gravely embarrassed by it.”

“Please just tell me what it is.” Charlotte said with sudden vehemence. “Do not keep prevaricating and just say it.” Once again, she seemed angry with him, but he knew it truly was just fear.

If only he did not have to hurt her so, and yet he had come too far now to go back.

“Then I shall tell you straight out, Charlotte. And I shall beg you not to blame Ruth because she did not know any of it. She is as much a victim of it as you are.”

“A victim of what?”

“Charlotte, Ruth Clarkin is your half-sister. She is the child of your father.” James listened to a voice that he did not even recognize as his own.

He sounded suddenly so businesslike as if he could not tell her with the emotions that he himself felt, but rather he had to remove himself from it for just a moment.

He watched in silence as her expression changed from incredulous to angry to confused.

“What are you saying?” She said, and he knew that the accusatory tone was not really meant for him.

“I am so sorry, Charlotte, but the Clarkin family in Hollerton gave up all their secrets for a purse full of coins from my father’s attorney. And that is how my father was able to keep me away from you for the rest of his life. And I knew that he would make that information known, that he would do it out of spite. And so, in the end, I had to choose to turn away from you. Not into the arms of another, not because I was playing some game that I thought I had won with a kiss, but because I loved you so much I could not bear to see you and your father so cruelly exposed.”

“And now? What of now?” She said, and he knew that she was in shock, that she was wishing he would simply swallow down the words

he had spoken as if they had never existed.

“I have the greatest of respect for your father and I am very fond of Ruth Clarkin. I would not easily hurt either one of them, but you would not hear me, Charlotte. You would not allow me to tell you how much I love you because you did not believe that I ever did. But I cannot imagine the rest of my life without you, especially after these three long years, and I have to do something to make you see my love, to *know* it.”

“I do not know what to... I mean I cannot...” Charlotte rose to her feet and made to leave the room before turning back again.

She seemed entirely at sea and all James could do was stand and look at her, waiting for her to decide what she did next. Finally, tears coursed down her face and he knew he was bearing witness to a range of emotions, none of which he could entirely identify.

And, in the end, with nobody else to go, Charlotte raced towards him, her head hitting his chest with full force as she silently demanded to be held.

James wrapped his arms around her shoulders and held her as she wept tears of anguish and confusion. He buried his face in her thick, fragrant red hair closed his eyes, relishing the feel of her in his arms and knowing that he had, in that moment, been the cause of such

great pain.

If only his father had never been such a determined, spiteful man. None of this might have happened, everything might have lain dormant forevermore.

He held her until her weeping subsided and her breathing began to return to normal. They stood locked in their embrace for several minutes before Charlotte finally extricated herself.

“I think you should go now.” She said, rubbing furiously at her face with her hands in the attempt to dry her tears.

“I do not like to leave you in this state, Charlotte.”

“Well, I do not want you here. I want to be left alone.” She said and sounded suddenly so exhausted that he knew he must accede to her request.

“Then I shall not leave without first telling you how much I love you, Charlotte, because I do. I love you with all my heart, and I always will. Whatever you decide, even if you choose never to set eyes on me again, I shall always, always love you.”

When she would not look at him, James knew the time had come to leave and he turned slowly to make his way out of Hawthorn Manor.

Chapter 31

When Charlotte explained to Gwendolyn that she would have to leave the following morning, her aunt was kindness personified. It was clear that Charlotte was greatly upset, and Gwendolyn did not press her for any of the details, likely thinking that it had much to do with the Duke of Sandford.

Well, in the end, Charlotte supposed that it did. But that was not the thing which upset her so greatly and she knew it. She had to speak to her father, she had to know if it was all true.

“I really am very sorry to be leaving you so soon, Aunt Gwendolyn.” Charlotte had said while she tried not to dissolve into tears once again.

“I can see that something has upset you and as much as I would like to try to solve it, my dear, I can also see that your mind is made up. Sometimes when one is in the grip of a great upset, only the closest of family will do and I understand entirely why you would want to be at home with your father.”

Charlotte had smiled warmly and promised to return to her aunt at some point in the future. And as far as her father was concerned, for all her haste to return home, to have it out with him, she was truly

afraid to set eyes on him for fear of discovering that she no longer loved the only parent she had ever truly known.

The carriage ride back had begun in silence and Charlotte could see that Ruth's eyes were as puffy as her own for lack of sleep and a torrent of tears that had been shed.

"Ruth are you managing alright?" Charlotte said, and Ruth shifted in her seat to turn to look at her.

"Yes, I am managing Miss." Ruth said quietly. "And I really am very sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry about. In all of this, you have been done the greatest wrong. When I think of how you have looked after me, helping me into gowns, seeing that my hair is immaculate before I go out to enjoy myself, I can hardly think straight."

"But can you not see that I have always enjoyed that, Miss?" Ruth said, and Charlotte could hear the emotion. "That is when we have been closest, is it not? That is when we have laughed and talked and shared our little secrets. I would not have missed any of it for the world."

"We should have been able to do that as *sisters*, not as mistress and maid." Charlotte said and finally her tears fell again. "Can you forgive

me?" She said miserably.

"Goodness me, and I have sat in silence all this time for fear that you could not forgive me." Ruth said and laughed.

It was not as fulsome as her laugh ordinarily was, but it was enough to return Charlotte to her old self just a little; it was enough to give her a few moments respite from her shock and numbness.

"But what for?"

"For encouraging the Duke to speak to you."

"I must admit that I am so lost at the moment, I hardly know if, given the choice, I would have gladly lived without the knowledge. But then I think of you, my dear, and I cannot bear it. However much this has hurt me, discovering that you are my sister is the brightest of corners." Both women were dabbing furiously at their faces with crisp white handkerchiefs and sniffing non-stop.

"There is a part of me that thinks that I have always known it, Miss." Ruth said shyly.

"Perhaps there is a part of me that has always known it too. After all, I have never been in want of a sister since you arrived at Thurlow Manor." Charlotte reached out and took Ruth's hand, squeezing it

hard. “And perhaps now that we are coming to terms with it between ourselves, you might finally call me Charlotte and not *Miss*.”

“Goodness, that shall seem very strange indeed, Miss. *Charlotte*.”

“But a very pleasant sort of strange, my dear.”

“What are going to say to your father?” Ruth said, bringing Charlotte back to the reality of her sudden flight back to the east.

“In all truth, I have no idea.”

“Perhaps that is the best way, in the end. If you have not planned what to say, then at least you can speak from the heart.”

“Although I fear that my heart might speak angrily.”

“In the circumstances, I am sure that your father will understand.”

“*Our* father, Ruth.”

“Yes.” Ruth said and nodded and Charlotte realized just how much that young woman had to come to terms with.

If she herself had to navigate the choppy seas of her father’s infidelity, Ruth had to question her own origins. Charlotte knew, of course, that

Ruth was not particularly close to the Clarkin family, but what a great upheaval to discover at the age of one-and-twenty that you are not who you thought you were.

In the end, Charlotte hardly knew which thing she was the angriest about.

“Well now, this a surprise.” Lucas Cunningham said as he wandered out through the front door of Thurlow Manor and helped Charlotte and Ruth down from the carriage. “Please tell me you have not fallen out with dear Gwendolyn.”

“No, Papa. No, I have not fallen out with Gwendolyn. She is a very fine woman and I would never imagine a reason for falling out with her. But then I suppose we never truly know people, do we?” Charlotte ended her sentence somewhat aggressively.

“Well, I think you should leave the unpacking for now,” Lucas said with some concern when it looked as if his daughter might unstrap and carry her trunk herself. “Ruth, perhaps you would have a word with the driver and ask him to take all the luggage inside?” He said, and Ruth nodded.

Charlotte knew that she would not be able to hold onto her discovery

for very much longer and, fearing that she might let it all out there in front of the Manor house itself, she began to make her way inside to the drawing room in the hope that her father would follow her.

He did, of course, realizing immediately that there was something wrong with her.

Following her into the drawing room, Lord Cunningham closed the door behind them. He stood and watched as Charlotte took off her bonnet and undid her cloak, laying both of them carelessly on an armchair before sitting down squarely on top of them.

“Charlotte?”

“Did my mother know?” Charlotte turned to look her father squarely in the eyes.

“I beg your pardon?” Lord Cunningham said and walked further into the room to take the armchair opposite the one in which his daughter sat.

“Did my mother know?” She said again and stared at him levelly, witnessing the very moment in which he realized the meaning behind her words.

“About Ruth?” He said with a suddenly exhausted sigh. “No, she never

knew. I went to very great lengths to ensure that she was not confronted with the awful truth.”

“Who was Ruth’s mother?” Charlotte said and realized that her anger had dissipated the very moment that her father had volunteered the truth.

For some reason, she had expected him to lie to her and yet she realized that he never truly had before. Yes, he had held the most damaging of all secrets close to his chest, but he had always answered his only daughter honestly in all other things.

“I daresay you will not remember the woman, Charlotte, she was your nurse. She spent a good deal of time caring for you when your mother could not, and as time went on, she took a good deal of care of me too.”

“And mother never knew?”

“You must not think that this was something I undertook lightly. And in truth, such intimacy between myself and your nurse happened only once. But then once is enough, is it not? Once is surely once too often when you have given your vow to another.”

“But you cared for her?”

“Yes, I cared for her great deal. In truth, she was a friend to me, despite the difference in our station. I do not wish to excuse my actions in any way and I hope you will believe me when I tell you that I am not. But I was extraordinarily lonely as a young man, your mother had been ill for more of our marriage than she was well.”

“But that was not her fault.”

“No, it was not her fault. It was nobody’s fault, Charlotte.” The old Baronsaid and his pale blue eyes shone with tears. “It was not your mother’s fault, it was not my fault, it was not Violet’s fault.”

“Her name is Violet?”

“Yes, and I would beg you not to think ill of her, for she was the kindest of women. The blame was mine, every bit of it, and I would not seek to blame anybody else.”

“But where did she go? Surely you did not dismiss her when you discovered she was with child, especially since you say that you did not blame her for what happened between you.”

“I did not dismiss her and would never have done so. She went away for a while, obviously, when her belly began to swell, and it would become clear to all that she was with child. But I did not intend to abandon her, and Violet knew that. I had every intention of taking my

responsibilities, whatever it was that Violet chose to do in the end, I had promised to support her.”

“And so, she decided to give her child away?”

“Unfortunately, Violet did not have a say in the matter, Charlotte. You see, that poor young woman died giving birth to Ruth and so, in the end, I could not fulfill my obligation to her. But I could fulfill my obligation to my daughter.”

“You gave her away?”

“For her sake as well as your mother’s. There was no way I could see of keeping the child in the house without alerting your mother to the very great wrong I had done her. In the end, all I could do was have her raised by another family and then, the very moment she was old enough to come here and work, I went back for her.”

“But Papa, my own sister has been my maid all these years.”

“And that was the very best that I could do for her at the time. You know well that the offspring of such clandestine affairs are treated with far more scorn than the perpetrators. Ruth would have been vilified as illegitimate and despised when, in truth, I should have been the one to suffer.”

“Yes, that is very true.” Charlotte said and sighed.

It was the way of England and she knew it. Even though her father’s mistake had been very grave, he had truly done as much as he could do for his secret daughter without giving her away to everybody.

“Does she know?” He said and suddenly looked as if he would truly shed the tears which continued to shine in his eyes.

“She does,” Charlotte said and was suddenly keen to ease his worries. “But she is not at all angry with you, Papa, you must not worry about that. She cares for you the same way she always has. She is a very fine young woman.”

“Yes, she is. And I cannot tell you the pain it has caused me at times to look upon my own daughter and know that she is just a servant in my house.”

As Lord Cunningham bent his head to hide his tears, Charlotte realized just how much he must have suffered over so many years. Her father was not like other men; he did not have the capacity to father children and ignore them as so many in his position did. Charlotte knew that he undoubtedly loved Ruth every bit as much as he loved her, and she was relieved to know it.

“I wish you had told me, Papa,” Charlotte said tearfully, knowing that,

in the end, that was all she had left with which to reproach him. “I wish I had not heard it from another.”

“And who was it? I cannot think that dear Gwendolyn knew if your mother did not.”

“It was James Harrington.”

“The Duke’s son?”

“No, he is the Duke now.”

“And that is why he disappeared so suddenly all those years ago?”

“It was not James who sought the information but rather his father. He had held it over James these last three years that he would, if James continued to associate with me, tell all of society the truth of Ruth’s origins. And so, James kept it to himself and did, in the end, just as his father had wanted him to do.”

“And is he married now?”

“No, he is not.”

“Then he defied his father in the end, did he not? By not marrying at all?” Lucas looked up and smiled, his eyes red and his expression

resigned.

“I suppose so.”

“Well, I am sure that he had his reasons for telling you in the end. When a young man does something to protect another, even when it causes pain to himself, he is not to be dismissed lightly.”

He looked right into Charlotte’s eyes and she could hardly believe that, even in such a moment, her father’s first thought was her own future happiness.

“Well, I am too tired to think of it at the moment. I shall come back to that another day.” She rose to her feet and felt suddenly exhausted. “Papa, forgive me but I must lay down for a while.”

“Of course.” Lord Cunningham rose to his feet also but stood tentatively as if he did not know whether or not his own daughter would welcome his embrace anymore.

Charlotte, almost broken by his uncertainty, covered the short distance and threw her arms around his neck.

“Can you forgive me?” He whispered, his voice ragged.

“Of course, I can.” Charlotte said, surprised to discover that it was, in

the end, what she truly wanted to do.

“Then I have another daughter’s forgiveness I must beg, have I not?”

He said as he released her.

“Yes, but I do not think that she will deny you either.” Charlotte said and kissed his cheek before turning to leave the room.

Chapter 32

When James received a hurried note from Ruth Clarkin that she and her mistress were to depart for the east, he had begun to pack immediately. Without even sending word forward to Hector and Lawrence that he would be staying, he set off as soon as he was ready.

Ruth had begged him not to give up on her sister for otherwise all the pain and hardship would have been for nothing. She gently suggested that he ought to make his way to Hanover Hall and wait to hear from her.

So, his accomplice, however much she had suffered, was still willing to work with him. What a very fine young woman Ruth Clarkin was.

But James had an important call to make on the way and he instructed his driver to stop in town at the office of Charles Holt, Attorney at Law.

When he jumped down from the carriage and approached the front door, he sincerely hoped he would find the dreadful little weasel was in residence. Holt was the last piece of unfinished business, barring Charlotte herself, and he was determined to set things to rights before making his way to Hanover Hall.

On the day James had spoken to Ruth and decided that he would, finally, tell Charlotte everything, he had immediately made his way to the office of Mr. Jacob Summerton, the attorney who had been so helpful to him in his quest to be closer to Charlotte again.

Telling the man he intended to retain him as the attorney to the Duchy, he asked him to draw up an immediate and very specific document. Summerton did so without delay, clearly delighted to be so endorsed by the Duke of Sandford.

When he knocked at the office door, a middle-aged woman with a sour expression opened it and ushered James in. When he announced himself as the Duke of Sandford, the old crow looked for all the world as if she could not care less. Still, she no doubt suffered enough if she was Holt's housekeeper. She had likely already had her fair share of being ordered about by Holt as if he was the master of a grand establishment himself.

She left him in an overly opulent office, clearly, the old Duke had paid Holt well, and returned moments later with the attorney, whom she announced rather grandly as if the man had just wandered down an ornate staircase to be presented at a ball.

Charles still wore the look of self-satisfaction he had worn ever since realizing he had the upper hand in the master-servant relationship. Well, that was all about to come to an end.

The very moment the housekeeper had departed, James rose from his seat and lurched across the room, grasping Holt by the throat just as he had done three years before.

Before Charles Holt could make a sound, James had forced him back across his own desk and held him down with ease.

“So, you think I have forgotten my promise to make your life a misery, do you?” James hissed angrily, feeling every rough emotion he had felt the last time the two of them had come to blows.

“What? Your Grace, please.” Holt squeaked, and James was gratified by his fear.

“When I release you, I have a paper for you to sign.” James went on with menace.

“Then I shall read it over, Your Grace and.....”

“No, you will just sign it, or I shall choke the life out of you here and now.” James said and released him.

He threw Holt into a chair and slapped the paper hard down on the desk, glaring at the terrified attorney the whole time.

“You cannot make me sign this.” Charles said as he scanned the document.

“And yet you *will* sign it.”

The paper contract was a brief promise never to speak of the events Charles Holt had learned whilst acting upon the instructions of the last Duke. Any breach of the contract would result in Charles Holt forfeiting a larger sum of money than he had ever possessed in his life, not to mention the possibility of criminal charges.

“I shall cry out.” Charles said hopelessly.

“Not if you cannot breathe you shall not.” James pressed the feather quill into the attorney’s hand and forced him to dip it into the inkwell and sign his name.

“This is not legally binding. This is coercion.”

“And who on earth is going to believe you over me? The old Duke is dead, and the new Duke will stick at nothing if you cross him. Do you understand? And it goes without saying that your services are no longer required by the Duchy of Sandford.”

Charles Holt merely nodded and raised a hand to the reddened skin of his throat.

Content with his little piece of business, James rose to his full height, smiled, and walked out of Charles Holt's office, safe in the knowledge that the man was too much of a coward to go up against him in the future. He had underestimated James and it had been his undoing.

Hector had, as always, been very pleased to see him and not at all perturbed by his sudden appearance. Perceiving, as he always did, that all was not well, Hector had very quickly rooted as much of the truth out of James as he could possibly be given.

And, as always, Hector's insistence that James get on with things and not simply sit and wait had propelled him into motion once more. Just two days after arriving at Hanover Hall, James set off on one of Hector's horses across the fields, covering the short distance to Thurlow Manor in no time at all.

It was with some trepidation that he approached the front of the house and he smiled nervously as he asked the housekeeper to let Lord Cunningham know that he had come specifically to see him.

He waited for only a few nervous moments in the hallway before Lord Cunningham himself was striding towards him with a smile on his face and his hand outstretched.

James could hardly believe the reception, having fully expected that Lord Cunningham, angry at James for his upending of his life, would have thrown him out without so much as an audience. But he was seeming to welcome James back into his home as if there had not been three years passed since their last meeting.

“How very nice to see you, Your Grace.” The Baron said without real ceremony, despite the fact that he had addressed James correctly.

It was nice to see that the Baron remained unchanged, whatever had passed beneath the roof of his house in the last days.

“And it is a pleasure to see you, Lord Cunningham. In truth, I did not think that you would admit me.”

“Oh, that is just silly, my dear fellow. Come along, we shall sit in the drawing room for a while. I have asked the housekeeper to arrange for a tea tray.” Lord Cunningham laid in arm over the younger man’s shoulder and led him through the corridor to the drawing room.

“Have a seat.” He said the minute the two of them were alone and the door closed behind them.

“Thank you, Lord Cunningham,” James said and knew that he could not wait for the man himself to broach the subject, he would have to

be the one to begin. “I have come here to see you today to apologize for all the upset that I have undoubtedly caused you and your family.”

“You are apologizing for things that are outside of your control, young man.” Lord Cunningham said with a smile. “After all, it was not you who fathered a child out of wedlock, was it?”

“But you can hardly think that it was my business to tell it to Charlotte and Ruth.” James was a little dumbfounded after a sleepless night expecting the worst.

“No, it was *my* business to tell them, but I did not do that, did I? I knew that it was all bound to come out one day and yet I did nothing to soften the blow. I kept my head in the sand, as it were, and hoped for the best.”

“I would never have told them without good reason.” James wanted desperately to explain himself.

“And I can already guess at your reasons, Your Grace.” Lord Cunningham smiled. “With your father gone, you thought that you might be able to find an easy route back into my daughter’s heart. But then you know her almost as well as I do, so you must have realized that she would never have made it easy for you. It is in her nature to analyze, to make decisions, and to stand by them. If I am truthful, you would never have been able to find your way back into her heart

without telling her why you left in the first place. And I do not think you would have taken that decision lightly, and so I cannot blame you for it.”

“And yet I had expected that you would.”

“It would be the easy way out, would it not? To take all my anger and disappointment in myself and place it on the shoulders of another who does not deserve it. But in the end, that would have got me nowhere, would it?” The old Baron leaned his head against the high-back of his armchair and sighed. “And if I am to continue to be honest, I am bound to say that the situation, now that it has come to a head, has finally provided me with a great sense of relief. It is as if I had been squeezed for many years, my entire body in the grip of a vice, and now somebody has undone it set me free and I am, in the end, extraordinarily grateful to you.”

“I must be honest and say that I did not see that outcome, Sir.”

“And yet it is the outcome nonetheless, so all that there is left to do is for us to move forward, do you not think?”

“Yes, I do.”

“So instead of worrying about me and my relationship with my daughters, perhaps you ought now to turn your attention to your own

relationship with my dear Charlotte. You must not forget that all of this is for a reason and you cannot give up now, can you?" The Baron smiled at him in a knowing way and James realized for the first time in his life what it would have been like to have had a true father.

"I shall do my very best."

"Then perhaps it is time for me to wander off, as you will remember it is my custom, and leave you to drink this tea, if it ever arrives, with the lady herself. What do you say?" The Baron rose to his feet.

"I should like that very much, Sir."

When Charlotte's father told her that James was waiting for her in the drawing room, she hardly knew how she would react when she saw him. The last days had been the worst of her life and yet, at the same time, they were strangely the best.

When she saw her father with Ruth, how at peace he was now to finally be able to act as a true father, Charlotte felt a curious excitement. She knew, of course, that the relationship could never be declared publicly, but at least they would know it amongst themselves now and it was as if they had turned a corner into a better life.

She opened the door of the drawing room and stepped in, quickly closing it behind her. She remained where she was for a moment, looking across the room at James and the untouched tea tray which sat on the low table in front of him.

“Are you waiting for me to pour that?” Charlotte said in a haughty tone.

“Well, I did not like to start without you,” James said and smiled at her. “It would seem rather rude, given that I am only a guest not a very welcome one at that.”

“Now what makes you think you are not welcome?” For some reason, Charlotte could feel her mouth turning up into a smile, quite unbidden, and the old feelings of excitement returning to her.

“I suppose because I have made such a mess of things these last three years, have I not?”

“My goodness, I have never seen such a mess,” Charlotte said and began to enjoy herself in the old way, teasing him just a little. “But I daresay you blundered along with the very best of intentions.”

“I did. I really did blunder, my dear woman.” He nodded vigorously and his green eyes twinkle just as they always did when he was amused.

How very handsome he was with his neatly clipped dark hair and wonderful smile. Charlotte could feel her resolve turning to nothing.

“I do wish you had told me back then, James.” She said, being serious for just a moment. “Just me, I mean. I know now that you could not have gone against your father’s wishes without hurting my father, and I will always be grateful to you for that. Not to mention the fact that I will always be disquieted by the way I treated you afterward.” She shuddered and winced. “But I do wish you had told me, for it would have spared me the pain of the last three years. I would have missed you dreadfully, but I would have known that you loved me.”

“At the time, I did not want to hurt the wonderful relationship you have with your father. Never having had such a thing myself, I could see immediately that it was a thing worth protecting, whatever the cost.”

“And it is still wonderful, James. We have certainly had our moments these last few days, but we are closer than ever now.”

“If only I could have foreseen that at the time.”

“I suppose that is something that none of us could have managed.” She said and shrugged. “But at least you have put things right now before I made a fool of myself by marrying that dreadful Marcus

Hillington.”

“So, you really were going to marry him then, if he agreed to it?”

“What do you mean *if he agreed to it?*” Charlotte said and finally continued through the room to stand in front of him. “Of course, he would have agreed to it.”

“I am afraid you cannot sure of that, my dear Charlotte. You see, I made something of a study of that man and am bound to tell you, however painful it might be, that he appeared to have absolutely no regard for you whatsoever.” James’ broad grin was enough to melt her heart.

“I think we should never mention Marcus Hillington again.” Charlotte said and laughed.

What a truly wonderful feeling it was to laugh again, how very much better life felt already. She could hardly think that she had laughed at all since the night of Lord Morley’s ball.

“Perhaps you should have it written into our marriage vows, my dear.” He reached out to pull her into his arms. “For I fear that if you do not, I shall find myself unable to keep quiet about it.”

“You are sure that I will marry you then?”

“As sure as I will ever be.” He said and gently tilted her chin so that their eyes met. “But you should know that I cannot bear to be without you now. I love you so much, Charlotte. These last three years have been as purgatory to me.”

“And I love you too, James. However angry I grew, I could not stop loving you.”

“Well, hurry up and let me kiss you, my dear, before your father blunders back in here.” He said and quickly covered her lips with his own.

Epilogue

“Well, I could have remained your lady’s maid, Charlotte.” Ruth said plaintively as she helped her sister into her beautiful ivory wedding gown.

“No, you could not, because you are my sister, Ruth. I cannot have you as a maid now that I know that, can I?”

“But what else am I to do?” Ruth was clearly teasing her.

“Be one of the family at last. Would you not like that?”

“I would like that more than anything, you know I would. But I cannot sensibly be a part of your family, sitting down to dinner and sharing my life with you all without drawing the suspicions of the rest of the household, not to mention the rest of society.”

“But if you were my companion, then you would.”

“Oh, I see.” Ruth said and Charlotte could see her thinking it through.

“And as my trusty companion, you would come everywhere with me. Into the town to buy fabric and have tea, abroad if my new husband and I ever decide to take a trip. Do you not see, we really shall be

together forever?" Charlotte said and smiled before she saw Ruth's expression drop. "My goodness, whatever is it? Why do you suddenly look so sad?"

"I am sad, sister because I cannot come over to the west of the county with you. As wonderful as it would be for us to be together every day, I cannot now live at Sandford Hall."

"Because of Papa?" Charlotte said, and tears of emotion filled her eyes.

"I cannot leave him. He cannot lose two daughters in one day, it would be too cruel."

"You have never blamed him, have you?"

"No, there is no sense in it. We all make mistakes in his life, each and every one of us. And it is only by dint of circumstances that the consequences differ for us all. But then I look at the consequences of your father's mistake and I find that I can easily forgive him. After all, I finally have a sister, do I not? And, after one-and-twenty years on this planet, I realize I have a father who truly does love me. No, I cannot blame him for any of it, even if I should just a little."

"I am bound to say that it gives me great comfort to know that you will be here with him when I am not. Oh, but I cannot tell you the pain that our parting will cause me." Charlotte said, and her voice

cracked.

“No, no, you must not cry before you go to church. You cannot arrive tearstained and have the whole congregation think you are marrying under duress.” Ruth said and laughed.

“And we are not to be parted now, are we? We live in the same county and we shall be regular visitors to one another, shall we not? Your new husband is a very fine and sensible man, so sensible that I do not think he would dare to try to keep two sisters apart now, do you?”

“I know he would not.”

“And so, we must now both reconcile ourselves to new lives. I shall stay here, and you shall stay at Sandford and we shall write every day and see one another often. And in that manner life shall work out very well indeed, shall it not?”

“You always know what to do, Ruth. You always have the most sensible plan of all and the very best way of saying it.”

“And you are always so very free with your compliments.”

“I do love you, my dear Ruth.”

“And I love you, sister.” Ruth said and the two of them embraced.

“Now, you cannot leave him waiting any longer. We must set off now or your groom will think that you are not coming at all.”

“Very well, Ruth.” Charlotte said and kissed her sister’s cheek before the two of them walked hand-in-hand out of her chamber for the last time.

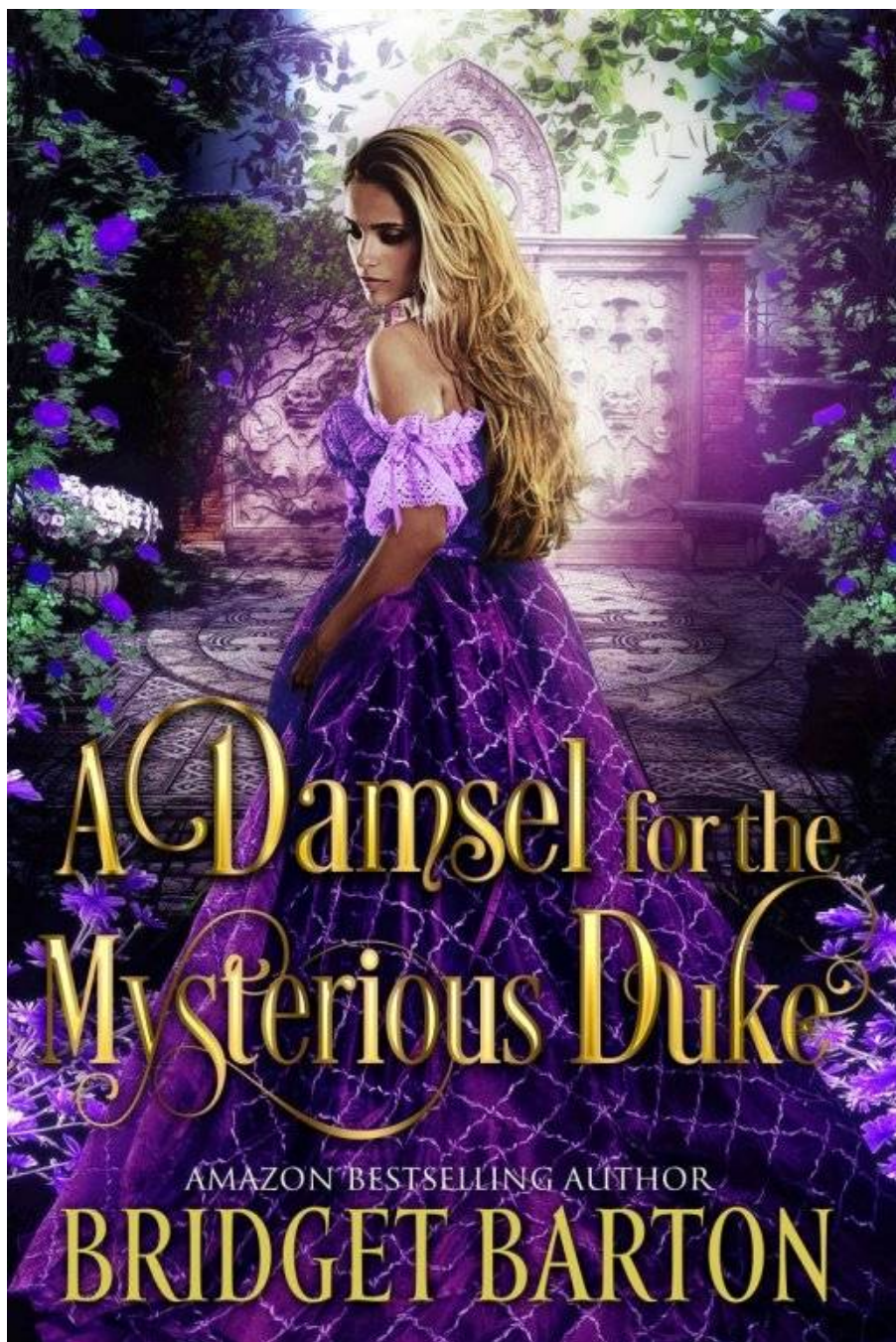
THE END

*Can't get enough of Charlotte and James? Then make sure to check out the
[Extended Epilogue](http://bridgetbarton.com/extended) to find out...*

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://bridgetbarton.com/extended>

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first
chapters from “**A Damsel for the Mysterious Duke**”, my Amazon Best-
Selling novel!)*



A Damsel for the Mysterious Duke

Introduction

Recovering from a lengthy illness, Georgina Jeffries is sent to convalesce in the Devonshire home of her father's cousin. Finding an instant friendship with his daughter, Fleur, the two of them eagerly await a garden party to be held on the fine estate of the young and handsome Duke of Calder. But when she first meets him, Georgina is certain that she knows him from somewhere, she just cannot place the handsome man anywhere in her memory.

Emerson Lockhart is a man with a secret. Now the Duke of Calder, he is painfully aware that he was not always so. And when he meets Miss Georgina Jeffries again after more than ten years, he is relieved to realize that she does not recognize him as the boy who was once a servant in her home; the boy who had once been her only friend.

But when the Duke lets his old nickname for her slip, Georgina finds herself spiraling back in time, instantly remembering young Sammy White, the servant boy and childhood friend who had disappeared so suddenly and without explanation so many years before.

As a team, can the two of them discover the young Duke's true origins? And can they, along the way, finally navigate the growing romance which both of them would try to deny?

Chapter 1

Although Winton House in Devonshire was very much smaller than her father's estate in Hertfordshire, Georgina Jeffries instantly warmed to it.

It was a fine old house of many quirks, crooked corridors, and narrow secret staircases here, there, and everywhere. And it was set in the most beautiful grounds, both neat and rambling all at once.

From Georgina's chamber window she looked down on a small lake surrounded by beautiful trees and luscious green shrubbery. And all around the water's edge were daffodils, as yet unopened, but with buds enough to promise a fine display when spring began to turn warmer.

"May I come in, Georgina?" came the tentative voice of her cousin Fleur from the other side of the door.

"Yes, of course," Georgina said brightly and turned to smile at Fleur as she came cautiously into the room. "I have just been looking at the view. Really, I do not think I have seen anything so pretty in a long time."

"That is why I told Papa you ought to have this chamber. It really

does have the nicest view of the lake, and when the daffodils are out, there are so many that they seem to glow when you look down upon them.” Fleur smiled.

Although the two had met many years before, they were but girls, and Georgina could barely remember the experience at all. Fleur’s father, Felix Allencourt, had made the journey from Devonshire to Hertfordshire many years ago to see his cousin, Georgina’s father. He had taken his young daughter with him, leaving his son behind as comfort and company to his ailing wife.

Georgina had never met her second cousin Fleur’s mother, but she knew that she had died some ten years before.

“It really is so kind of you to have spent so much of your day showing me around the place. And I cannot tell you how comfortable I am already here at Winton House, for it really is such a lovely place. I can hardly wait to see the sea; I so rarely have a chance of it, being landlocked back home at Ashdown Manor.”

“If I concentrate very hard, I can almost remember Ashdown Manor,” Fleur said thoughtfully. “Well, I can remember how large it is, at any rate.” She laughed.

“Yes, it is very large. But I cannot think that I have ever seen a house so well situated as your own. Devonshire really is the most beautiful

county, is it not?"

"I would never wish to leave it." Fleur advanced a little further into the room somewhat shyly. "I thought you might like some help unpacking your gowns and what have you."

"Oh, yes please, that would be most welcome," Georgina said and looked down at her open and unpacked trunk. "I seem to have brought rather a lot with me." She laughed.

"Well, that means that you may stay for a long time." Fleur looked extremely pleased with the prospect. "And I would be very glad of your company. I have friends, of course, but it would be so nice to have a woman of my own age in the house for a while. Jeremy is a fine and attentive brother, but he is a *brother*." She laughed. "And Great-Aunt Belle is a wonderful lady with many stories, but alas she forgets that I have heard the stories over and over again."

"My grandmother was the same," Georgina said brightly as she thought that she and her cousin might get on very well indeed. "And I am keen to meet Great-Aunt Belle to see if she is anything like my grandmother, given that they were sisters."

"I must admit that I am not sure that they were the greatest of friends when they were young girls together," Fleur said cautiously. "And I also must warn you that Great-Aunt Belle often speaks her mind with

little thought to the impact it might have on another. She is very old and often very sweet, so I must beg your forgiveness on her behalf in advance.”

“Good heavens, she sounds like my grandmother already. She was also a woman who did not spare anybody’s feelings when she had something to say.” Georgina laughed and reached into the trunk for the first of her gowns. “I am already looking forward to meeting her, and you need not worry about anything. Your family has been so kind already, and I cannot tell you how pleased I am to be here.”

And it was true, Georgina really was pleased to be in Devonshire and the home of her cousins. As the only child of Baron Charles Jeffries and his wife, Jane, Georgina had often felt lonely.

Like Fleur, she had friends of her own, although they were few, but they now seemed so keen to marry that she did not see them anywhere near as much as she might have liked.

She had always wanted a sister, often feeling a little envious of friends who were so blessed. But now that she was at Winton House with Fleur, she had high hopes of finding just that close relationship at last.

“I think the two of us will get along very well indeed,” Fleur said as she gently hung one of Georgina’s gowns. “I say, this gown is awfully pretty.”

“Thank you, it is one of my favourites.” Georgina smiled as she looked at the gown, a well-fitting garment in a very deep blue velvet; a colour which suited her pale complexion perfectly.

“When you are feeling a little better, Georgina, I think we must find a wonderful ball to attend so that you might wear that gown,” Fleur said excitedly. “Or, at the very least, a dance at the assembly rooms.”

“In truth, I am already feeling much better than I have done for some weeks. I think the promise of a change of scenery and a chance to meet family I have not seen since I was a child has done much to improve my health.”

“But we must be careful; we must not set you back in any way,” Fleur said seriously. “As the spring down here can be quite deceptive. Especially being so close to the sea, you must take care to keep well wrapped because there is often a keen breeze.”

“I shall take care, I promise.”

Georgina, ordinarily hale and hearty, had suffered from a lung infection which had seen her bedridden from Christmas until late February.

It had come as a great surprise to all, given that nobody could

remember Georgina being ill since childhood.

When she had finally declared that she was well enough to be up and about again, her mother and father had been greatly relieved. But it had been necessary to keep to Ashdown Manor and out of the cold, so much so that Georgina had become a little melancholy.

The stronger she got, the more listless Georgina became. She had not seen friends and acquaintances for several weeks and had the dreadful sensation that the world had moved on without her whilst she had remained standing still.

When her father had suggested writing off to his cousin in Devonshire to ask that she might convalesce in new surroundings, Georgina had felt an immediate sense of excitement. She had never been to Devonshire but had remembered her grandmother telling her what a beautiful place it was. Not only that, but there were cousins of her own age and the prospect of meeting other new people.

Her mother, of course, had been reluctant. The illness had terrified her, especially when it was at its height, and she had feared, secretly, that she might lose her only child.

Georgina, being a bright and perceptive young woman, had recognized her mother's reluctance to let her go immediately and had done much to allay her fears with promises that she would barely

move from Winton House until it was fully summer. She would only go outside for a few minutes here and there to get some fresh air and nothing more.

With her mother suitably placated, Georgina silently hoped for much more excitement than she had promised her mother she would be a party to. She wanted to walk by the sea and take every opportunity to enjoy herself and to meet new people. Still, Jane Jeffries did not need to hear all about her hopes and dreams for her time in Devonshire.

“Although I must admit it would be wonderful if you were able to attend a garden party at Calder Hall in a fortnight’s time.”

“Calder Hall?” Georgina said with interest.

“Yes, it is the home of the Duke of Calder, Emerson Lockhart.”

“Emerson Lockhart? What a fine name,” Georgina said, already determined that she would most certainly be well enough to go to a garden party on a Duke’s estate, even if she did have to wrap up warm for it.

“Yes, it is a fine name.” Fleur smiled.

“And is he a fine man?”

“I do not know as yet, cousin. He is the new Duke, you see, and still very young. He is not much older than we are, Georgina, at perhaps just one and twenty years.”

“Goodness, that is very young to be a Duke,” Georgina said and tried to imagine herself with such a responsibility just two years hence. “His father must have passed away so prematurely. It seems awfully sad.”

“Very sad,” Fleur said solemnly. “But he was not quite as young as you might suspect. The old Duke was easily in his middle fifties, although that is still no great age I daresay.”

“No, I suppose not.”

“Especially when you look at Great-Aunt Belle.” Fleur smiled mischievously. “Whose age I cannot even begin to imagine.”

Georgina laughed along with Fleur, pleased to find herself so at ease with her cousin and so quickly.

“But have you not met Emerson Lockhart before? I mean before his father passed away?”

“No, not once,” Fleur said in a gossip tone. “Although I must admit that my father was not terribly well acquainted with the old Duke and

his wife when they were alive. And Emerson Lockhart did not seem to grow up at Calder Hall, as I understand it. There is some talk of him having been unwell as an infant and child, and he did not really appear until he was much older.” Fleur screwed up her face as if she was not entirely sure that what she was saying was correct. “And then I suppose he would have been away at school and what have you.”

“So, he would appear to be quite mysterious.”

“Yes, I wonder if that is why he is giving this garden party. He has invited a great many people from the county, I believe.”

“And when did he become the Duke?”

“But six months ago.”

“I must admit myself already curious to see him.”

“I think much of the county is curious to see him if I am honest. This is to be his first event, for I believe he has kept himself very quiet at Calder Hall these last months, although he is often seen about on matters of Duchy business, or so my father tells me at any rate.”

“Your father has met him then?”

“Once or twice, I believe. They shared the same attorney, and I think

that they found themselves in one another's company on account of it."

"But they do not share the same attorney now?"

"Unfortunately, my father's attorney passed away some weeks ago. It was a great shame because he seemed like a very nice man indeed. And he kept working right up until the last, even though I am sure that he cannot have been much younger than Great-Aunt Belle."

"Oh dear, that is a shame."

"But listen to me, I am bombarding you with so much information and local gossip that you must already be tired of me," Fleur said apologetically.

Fleur really was sweet, and she looked so much like Georgina that the two of them really could have passed for sisters. They were both fair, although Georgina's hair was a paler blonde than her cousin's. And they both had bright blue eyes, just as each of their fathers did.

"Not at all; I do *love* to hear gossip," Georgina said, and Fleur laughed loudly. "I know I should not admit to such a thing, but it is true. And these last months I have been so starved for information of the outside world that I am very hungry for any news I get, even news concerning people I have never met and do not know."

“Sometimes that is the best news to get,” Fleur carried on, clearly emboldened by her cousin’s open admission. “Because you can hear the gossip first and then get to know the people concerned afterward. I think it makes it much more interesting and exciting.”

“So do I,” Georgina agreed. “Oh, Fleur, I am beginning to feel glad that I fell ill at Christmas.”

“Glad? But why?”

“Because it has brought me here, has it not? I do so love Ashdown Manor, but my few friends are all so keen to marry that they seem to have drifted away from me, even before I became unwell. But to be here now and find that you and I are so alike is such a wonderful thing to me.”

“You really think we are alike?”

“Well, we look alike,” Georgina began. “And we both like a bit of harmless, interesting gossip.”

“Yes, that is true.”

“And we have both missed out on having a sister, so that is just one more thing in common.”

“And I am so glad that you are here too, Georgina. Although I must say that I am sorry that you had to suffer so much beforehand to get here. Your mother and father must have been terribly worried.”

“They were, especially my mother. But then I suppose mothers always are.”

“Yes,” Fleur said quietly.

“Oh, forgive me, Fleur. That was insensitive of me.”

“No, it was not insensitive at all. My mother died so many years ago now that I am over that searing pain. I miss her, of course, but I am able to remember her fondly. I can be grateful now for the time that I did have with her, for she truly was a wonderful, warm mother.”

“I am only sorry that I never had the chance to meet her,” Georgina said truthfully. “But at least I shall get to meet Jeremy when he returns home next week.” She decided to change the subject just a little.

“My brother will like you very well indeed, and I am sure that you will like him once you get used to his silliness,” Fleur said and smiled with an almost motherly indulgence.

“And is Jeremy really so silly?” Georgina said, hoping that he was for she really did like a person with a sense of fun.

“He is, but he is always laughing and is such a nice brother to have around. I only hope that he behaves himself properly at the garden party.”

“Perhaps, between us, we can keep him entertained,” Georgina said, making it clear that she was determined to be well enough to attend.

“I think we have much to look forward to, cousin.”

“We most certainly do, Fleur.”

Chapter 2

“So, Cook has already begun the baking that we will need for the day, and the last of the fresh produce will be arriving tomorrow, Your Grace.” Mrs Thistlethwaite, the housekeeper at Calder Hall, was a woman who was both warm *and* efficient.

“Mrs Thistlethwaite, I am truly grateful for all your hard work,” Emerson Lockhart said and meant it. “Without you, I would not have known where to begin.”

“You do not need to know where to begin with such things, Your Grace. And it is true to say that your father never knew where to begin in such things either. But a Duke has other duties to attend to and must not worry over the ins and outs of the preparations for social occasions. You have a fine staff, Your Grace, and if you simply leave it to them, they will never let you down.”

“Yes, they really are very fine. You all are.”

“You are so kind, Your Grace.”

“And so, there is nothing that I need to do before Saturday? No matters that I must attend to for the garden party to go ahead without a wrinkle?”

“None at all, Your Grace. Mr Murray has all the other arrangements under control, and all of the footmen and maids are already well aware of their duties on the day.”

“And I daresay they have done it all before,” Emerson said with a smile. “Although I cannot remember attending one of my father’s garden parties.” He looked thoughtful.

“No, Your Grace, I cannot think that you have. I daresay you were at Eton or Oxford the last time there was a garden party here. Probably Oxford, I think, for it cannot have been so long ago.”

“Well, you have me assured that everything will go well, and I am very thankful for that.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Mrs Thistlethwaite said, perceptively recognizing that the conversation was coming to an end, just as any good housekeeper of many years standing might.

Mrs Thistlethwaite bobbed a very brief curtsy before making her way out of the drawing room and leaving her master alone once more.

Emerson knew that he had closed down their conversation the minute that it had begun to skirt around the edges of his life. He always shied away from the topic, always keeping in mind his father’s advice.

He knew well that his household staff was not as easily fooled as others in the county. No doubt when he had first appeared at Calder Hall for the first time as a boy of twelve, the servants must have had many conversations between themselves as to his true origins.

Talk of a lifetime of grave illnesses which had kept the boy away from his family home and the care of his mother for so long might well have satisfied most in the county, but Emerson knew that it could not possibly have satisfied the staff; people who had lived and worked at Calder Hall for so long that they must surely have had their own suspicions.

Particularly when the boy was not introduced to the family home until after the Duchess herself had passed away after a long illness.

And yet the Duchess' chronic poor health had certainly lent some weight to the idea that her child had been equally cursed in his own well-being.

Either way, his father had urged him never to be drawn into discussions of such a nature, to give away nothing that would make known his true origins and the start in life that would have been so at odds with anything that anybody around him might have suspected.

And yet it was the longest-serving members of the household staff

who had always accepted his presence without hesitation and had shown him such great kindness.

Mrs Thistlethwaite had been the housekeeper at Calder Hall since the last Duke and his wife had first been married. And Mr Murray, who had been but a second footman at the time, had proved himself a fine and loyal servant who had made his way into the position of butler before Emerson had arrived.

They were both trusted servants in something of an old-fashioned style, two people who would silently hold their master's secrets all the way to the grave, without ever once alluding to them. And he had no doubt that Mr Murray and Mrs Thistlethwaite would always stem the tide of any gossip they heard below stairs, making sure that every member of the household was as loyal as they were.

But, as kind as the two of them had been, Emerson felt most keenly the fact that he did not have any blood kin on the earth, at least as far as he knew.

Even when the Duke had still been alive, a man who had told him most clearly that he *was* his father, still Emerson had not felt that he truly belonged.

Perhaps if he had known his father for all his life and had not met him for the first time when he was already eleven years old, the two of

them might have been closer. Emerson had never doubted his father's love for him, the man had gone to such lengths to see that his son had a place in the world. But still, he had never felt truly comfortable, always having a sense of his old life and the feeling that he was a square peg in a round hole.

If only Garrett Winstanley had not so suddenly died. Of course, as a man in his early seventies who was still so intent upon continuing his duties as an attorney, perhaps it ought not to have been quite such a shock when his heart gave out without warning.

Emerson had found Garrett Winstanley something of a warm character, almost a grandfather figure who always engendered a feeling of security in the young man. And Emerson had always known that Garrett had much more information about Emerson's beginnings than he had ever said.

He was as loyal to the old Duke as the rest of the household, keeping that man's secrets right up until the end.

If only Emerson had determined to question Garrett Winstanley the moment the old Duke had passed away. Perhaps if he had taken his courage in both hands immediately, the old attorney might have relented and given him the information that would have made it, he assumed, so much easier to settle into his life and his duties.

It might even have convinced him that the old Duke really was his own father and that he *did* have a right to be where he was. Perhaps, had he spoken to Garrett, Emerson Lockhart might have felt sure of his place in the world, more comfortable with the idea that he really was now the Duke of Calder.

Garrett had been the first person that Emerson had met when he had begun his new life. Garrett had been the man who had taken him from the old place and brought him to Devonshire to hastily meet the Duke of Calder before being spirited away and coached in manners and bearing so that he might be inserted into life at Eton without drawing too much attention to himself.

But when he tried to think of it all, there was so much that seemed to have passed by in a blur. There was always the idea that he would give himself away and, in doing so, give his father away also. It had been such a tremendous weight for such a young boy to bear, and the concentration that was ever present was so arduous that he very quickly began to forget the details of his life before. Not entirely, but it had always seemed that there was just not room enough for him to think about it with everything else that he had to consider.

“You must not fill your head with so much that does not need to be there, my boy,” his father had said when a fourteen-year-old Emerson had asked him once again to explain how it was he came to be at Calder Hall.

He was home from Eton for the summer and, having only been resident at Calder Hall now and again in the three years since his new life had begun, Emerson was still struggling to adjust. Calder Hall did not feel like home, and yet neither did Eton. He knew that he had had a home once and could remember it quite clearly if he turned his mind to it. But now nowhere seemed like home, and he had genuinely hoped that the man who had told him he was his father could tell him why it was he felt that there was no place for him anywhere.

“But perhaps if you told me a little bit about how I came to be here, Father, I might be better prepared for awkward questions at school,” the young Emerson had ventured, hoping to get around his father that way.

“Why? Have you been asked awkward questions?” the old Duke said and seemed suddenly disconcerted.

“No, Father, no. Not yet, at any rate. I am just worried what I might say if I am asked, though.”

“The master at Eton is very well aware of the situation. He is well informed by Garrett Winstanley that you were gravely ill as an infant and spent much of your time away in treatment and convalescence. He knows that you did not regain your full-strength for some years and were unable to return home fully until you had.”

“But that is not true, is it? I have never been gravely ill, Father, not once.”

“I know, Emerson, but you must keep it in your head that you were. If you train your memory to believe it to be true, it will be so much easier to stick to it, do you see?”

“I do see, but I just do not see *why*. Am I truly your son? Am I really supposed to be here?”

“You are my son, Emerson. I promise you that you are my son.”

“Then why did you not keep me here with you before? Why did I live somewhere else so long? Did you not want me here?”

“Emerson, it is all very difficult to explain.”

“Did the Duchess know about me? She was not my mother, was she?” Emerson said cautiously and was gratified to see the look on his father’s face.

Finally, he had found out some of the truth, despite the fact that he had been quite certain of it anyway. But his father’s countenance had let him know very clearly that he was certainly not the product of the union between the Duke and Duchess of Calder.”

“No, she did not know about you,” his father said quietly and looked down for a moment. “But you are my son, and you do have every right to be here. But things would go very much more easily for you if you let go of this. And things would certainly go very much better for you if all around believed you to be the son of my wife and not the son of another woman. You understand?”

“Yes, I think so,” Emerson said, knowing that his father was very likely trying to protect him against any kind of future scandal, or past scandal at any rate.

“Then that is an end to it, is it not?”

“Yes, Sir,” Emerson said meekly, and then before he could stop himself, he went on, “But who is my mother? Did I ever have a mother?”

“Everybody has a mother, my dear boy.”

“But why can I not remember mine? And where is she now? Why can I not see her?”

“I am sorry to tell you that you will never see your mother. No good will come of you wondering about a woman who has always been beyond your reach.”

“Beyond my reach?” Emerson said, fearing the worst. “She is dead?”

“Yes,” his father said solemnly after a long pause in which Emerson thought he might not answer him at all. “And so, you must remember everything I told you about your past, the past that the world should believe.”

“That I was a seriously ill infant who could not be here at Calder Hall.”

“Precisely so.” His father smiled and ruffled his hair. “That’s my boy, you are clever enough to manage, I am sure.”

“Yes, Sir,” Emerson said quietly, knowing that he was certainly clever enough to know that he would never get any more information out of his father than that which he had gleaned that day.

Despite his smile, he knew that the door had been closed for him. He would never know who his mother was or why his early years had been spent the way they had. All he could safely assume was that his father, a man married to an invalid for so very long, had had a love affair with another woman, one who had borne him a child in secret.

And he had been so much of a secret that his father had not called for him until his own wife was so gravely ill that it was clear she would

not survive.

The Duke and Duchess had been sadly childless, a thing which had always left Emerson wondering if his father would have been so keen to seek him out had he not had a legitimate son of his own.

But such thoughts could do nothing but give him pain and, as he had grown into an educated and cultured young man, Emerson had tried to dismiss such musings. He had taken his father's advice and tried to train his mind to believe that the story of his life was, in fact, the truth of it.

And yet, when Garrett Winstanley had finally departed this mortal coil, the old feelings had begun to resurface. The idea that Emerson had missed his one and only chance to discover who he truly was had seemed somehow to open the gates and allow the old doubts and curiosity to flood back in.

Still, there was nothing to be done about it now. He was the Duke of Calder, and there was none who had known any different or dared to suggest otherwise.

All that remained was for him to become a part of the Duchy, at last, to be its figurehead, to be its Duke. And perhaps, if his garden party went well, it would be a start.

Chapter 3

“And have you ever been to Calder Hall before, Uncle Felix?” Georgina asked her father’s cousin as the family rode in his carriage to the Duke’s garden party.

Georgina had felt very much better of late, although Felix had taken some convincing. He was keen that his cousin’s daughter should not fall gravely ill again whilst she was in his care, and he had begged her to exercise caution and to wrap up warm, despite the fact that it was a fine spring day.

“A time or two, but many years ago. Only for very big events like the one we are to attend today. I cannot claim to have ever been to anything more intimate, such as a dinner, but rather events which tend to be open to the county.”

“And that was when the old Duke was still alive, Felix?” Georgina went on, full of curiosity.

“Yes, I have only ever been a guest of the previous Duke.”

“But you have met the current Duke.”

“Yes, Georgina, I have met the current Duke.” Felix laughed, seeming

to enjoy his young relation's curiosity and enthusiasm. "But really only ever in passing and quite accidentally when we have both found ourselves in the offices of Garrett Winstanley at the same time." His voice trailed off. "Dear old Garrett."

"What does he look like, Papa?" Fleur said, clearly as excited as Georgina.

"Like a young man with pale brown hair," Felix Allencourt said with some amusement.

"No, that is not what I meant at all, Papa," Fleur complained, and the whole party laughed at her exasperation.

"What she meant, Father, was to ask if the man is handsome at all?" Jeremy Allencourt said mischievously. "For I do believe that both my sister and my cousin intend to marry him."

"Jeremy!" Fleur said in chastisement.

"Yes, Jeremy," Georgina said and found herself enjoying being at the centre of such a lively family. "That is perfectly silly, two women cannot marry one man."

"Ah, but they might fight for him," Jeremy said dramatically.

“You really are every bit as foolish as Fleur told me you would be,” Georgina said teasing him.

“I most certainly am,” Jeremy said, a broad grin lighting up his fair and handsome features.

Jeremy had been staying with an old school friend when Georgina had first arrived at Winton House, returning only in the second week of her stay. But, just as Fleur had been, Jeremy was instantly likable, and Georgina had warmed to him immediately.

And Fleur and Jeremy had such a wonderful friendship that Georgina had come to realize just how much she had missed by being the only child of her parents. Whilst she had always wanted a sister, the short time she had spent with Jeremy Allencourt had made her begin to wish that she had had a brother also.

“I am afraid that I did not study the new young Duke with the same enthusiasm a young lady might,” Felix said with amusement, and it was easy to see that Jeremy had inherited his ready wit from his father. “So, I shall be of little use to you in this conversation.”

“Papa, you are teasing me I am sure,” Fleur said with contrived innocence. “But no matter, we can decide for ourselves when we get to Calder Hall.”

“If we ever get to Calder Hall,” Jeremy said hurriedly. *“For I do believe that this fine gravel path might go on forever.”*

Georgina looked out of the window and noted that her cousin was right after all. They had turned onto the drive which would lead to Calder Hall some minutes before and yet still there seemed to be no sign of the house itself.

There were many trees, and so it was likely that the house was simply obscured, but still, Georgina had the sense that she was most likely entering the grandest and largest estate she had ever set foot on.

As Fleur and Jeremy continued to chatter and tease one another with occasional interjections from their father, Georgina looked out of the window. They seemed to be crossing field after field, many of them separated by lines of trees and even a great lake in the middle of it all.

Turning in her seat to look out of the other window, Georgina could see the densest woodland, almost large enough to call a forest. It was certainly extensive, and she thought that a person might easily spend all day wandering its pathways without ever covering the same ground twice.

How fortunate the Duke of Calder was. If the outer reaches of his estate were anything to go by, the house and grounds itself must be indeed a sight to behold.

And Georgina did not have long to discover the truth of that, for as their carriage carried on along the pathway which now dropped down, the house and grounds came suddenly into view.

At the same time as Georgina's mouth fell open, she heard her cousin Fleur gasp. Surely every visitor coming to the Calder estate for the first time must have been subject to the same sensation of delight and surprise as they came over the brow of the hill.

"Goodness me, this most certainly is a very grand pile," Jeremy said and then laughed as he looked back and forth between his cousin and his sister. "And the ladies are speechless for the first time, which is quite a curious sensation is it not, Father?"

"What a shame that you do not find yourself so just now and again, Jeremy." Felix laughed. "It might make for a nice break for the rest of us."

"I know you cannot possibly mean that, Father," Jeremy said and chuckled. "But tell me, ladies, have you recovered your tongues? What do you think of the place?"

"I have never seen anything so stunningly beautiful in all my life," Fleur said breathlessly.

“And you, cousin Georgina? What have you to say about Calder Hall in all its glory?” Jeremy went on.

“I have never seen a place so large,” was all that Georgina could say, despite there being so many other observations she might have made.

They continued their journey in silence for a while, and Georgina was content to stare out at the ever-approaching Hall. The building itself was in three stories and of a pale beige stone with so many mullioned windows she could not count them. The main part of the hall was large and rectangular, except where it bowed handsomely around the main entrance where four immense stone columns held up a semicircular canopy over the wide stone steps.

From each side of the rectangular hall came two long and sprawling wings, again with many windows and smaller doorways, although both were only two stories high.

There were also a great many stone outbuildings here and there, each seemingly with their own courtyard and gardens.

All in all, Georgina could hardly begin to imagine that one man lived there all alone. Obviously, he would have an immense household staff, but in the main part of the hall itself, the Duke of Calder would be quite solitary.

Something about it made her feel a little sad, although she could not think why. Perhaps it was because she could see that there must surely be more than a hundred rooms in so immense a place, if not more, and she instantly imagined herself alone in a home of such size without family. Surely it must be a dreadfully lonely experience.

Georgina shook herself, remembering that a young man who was also a Duke was likely to have a great many friends and visitors and would probably never know a moment's peace.

The gardens were also quite a sight to behold. There were great rectangular lawns everywhere, with trees on one side and wonderful box hedging cut into immaculate cubes on the other. There were other pathways, walkways constructed of box hedging which had been clipped so neatly that there could not have been a stone wall built anywhere that was more level and precise. And the gravel pathways here and there created features of their own, all of them converging upon a large square of gravel with a small round lawn in the middle, upon which sat a great circular stone with an iron sundial on top of it.

Where the edge of one of the great lawns met the gravel apron at the very entrance of the hall, there was an attractive line of trees cut very neatly into conical shapes. Georgina stared at them mesmerized, realizing that there was not an inch to choose between one tree and its neighbour. They were absolutely exact and precise, and she wondered exactly who it was who kept them so.

Beyond the great hall, Georgina could see trees and greenery far off into the distance, and she wondered if the grounds at the back were as extensive as those at the front.

No doubt she was soon to find out, for there was no sign that visitors to the garden party were gathered in the grounds at the front at all. There were many carriages already drawn up on that great gravel apron, so she knew that other guests must have surely arrived.

“Well, here we all are,” Felix Allencourt said with a curious grim determination.

Georgina immediately realized that her father’s cousin was keen to get any greetings over and done with, to see an end to that initial awkwardness before it was even begun.

And she did not envy him his position, for as head of that particular household, it was for him to lead his little party into that social occasion and for them to simply follow.

When they had all climbed out of the carriage, a very smart and handsome young footman in full livery came to guide them through a great archway in the west wing of Calder Hall and out into the grounds beyond.

Once again, Fleur gasped, although much more quietly this time. And, in truth, Georgina would have done the same had she not stopped herself, for there in front of her was such a magnificent sight as she had never seen before.

The lawns at the back were equal to those at the front, immaculate and full of interestingly cut box hedging. In the centre of the largest of the lawns was a stone fountain so large that the sound of the water falling was pleasantly all-pervasive.

The whole garden seemed to be awash with colour as ladies and gentlemen dressed in their very best paraded this way and that, admiring the rose gardens that were only just in bud, or staring up silently at one of the many beautiful stone statues that were so well placed that Georgina had the feeling that she had stepped into a wonderful painting; a painting of the most perfect gardens and the most perfect garden party, something so beautiful that it could almost not exist in real life.

There were tables everywhere and footmen and maids either serving behind them or ferrying food and drinks this way and that. Georgina had never seen so many servants in all her life but realized that there must be many more still below stairs working away to continue to provide all that was needed in the garden.

She realized, of course, that such an immense place would surely need

a staff so large that they would almost resemble a small army.

“His Grace is receiving guests on the far lawn, near the fountain, you see?” the young footman said, clearly indicating that the party ought to make their way over and join the small queue of guests waiting to be greeted by their host.

“Thank you kindly, young man,” Felix Allencourt said with a smile, and the young footman bowed quickly before turning to make his way back to the front of the hall to receive yet more guests.

“Goodness me, I think that the Duke will be greeting people for his entire afternoon,” Fleur said in a hoarse and excited whisper. “Unless he only takes a minute or two with everybody he greets.”

“Oh Fleur, are we to have your commentary throughout the entire day?” Jeremy said teasingly.

“Yes, you must endure it, Jeremy. I am excited, and I do not care to hide it.” Fleur laughed. “And you will not spoil it for me with your cheeky comments.”

“I would not dream of it,” he said, and Georgina felt very touched when she saw Jeremy reach out and squeeze his sister’s hand briefly. “I truly wish you a very wonderful afternoon, my dear,” he went on, and his sister turned to smile at him.

“Can you see anything of the Duke yet?” Georgina said in hushed tones.

“Yes, there he is just there,” Felix responded quietly and lightly inclined his head in the direction of a young man who was smiling and talking with a middle-aged couple who appeared to be quite ostentatiously dressed.

No doubt they had been so keen to show their own standing in the world that they had rather outdone the Duke himself.

“Oh yes, I see,” Fleur said, inserting herself between her father and Georgina. “He is quite simply dressed, is he not? But I must say he is very *well* dressed. I wonder if that makes sense at all.”

“It makes perfect sense, my dear,” Georgina said with a laugh. “And you are right, he is quite immaculate without being at all overdone.”

The Duke was wearing dark cream breeches and very well made black knee boots. His tailcoat and waistcoat were of the deepest blue and both tailored to perfection. And his shirt stood out brilliantly white in the bright sunshine, its necktie full and yet not at all elaborate. Georgina thought that a young man could not be better and more sensibly dressed than the Duke of Calder.

If only she could get a little closer and study his features better still. She could see that his hair was thick and well tamed, giving the appearance of hair that could be, on a different day, quite unruly. It was a curious colour, neither brown nor blond, but rather a pale silvery brown that she thought most appealing.

As they moved ever closer to the Duke, a very smart man who must surely be the Duke's butler approached them.

"Might I introduce you to His Grace in a moment, Sir?" The butler said with measured politeness.

Georgina thought that it was a lovely way of asking Felix exactly who he was so that he could announce it to the Duke and the Duke could give the impression of knowing exactly who Felix was.

Not that Georgina was disparaging, for there must surely be many people in the vast crowd whom the Duke did not know, or did not recognize at any rate.

"Yes, of course, my dear fellow," Felix said and smiled at the butler warmly. "I am Mr Felix Allencourt of Winton House," he went on, immediately perceiving the butler's request just as Georgina had.

"Very good, Sir," the butler said approvingly. "And perhaps I should leave you to introduce your own dear family yourself, Sir?"

“Yes, of course,” Felix said, and Georgina was pleased to see that her father’s cousin seemed to be relaxing. “Thank you kindly.”

When their turn finally came, Georgina thought herself a little nervous. She had never met a Duke before, and despite the fact that he was only a couple of years older than she was, she still felt somewhat intimidated by it all.

“Your Grace,” the butler began with a certain amount of ceremony. “Mr Felix Allencourt.”

“Ah, Mr Allencourt,” the Duke said, turning around fully so that Georgina might study his face for the first time. “I do hope you are well, Sir. And what terribly sad news about dear Garrett Winstanley.”

“Very sad news indeed, Your Grace. I know that I shall miss him terribly, for he was my attorney for a good many years.”

For a moment, Georgina was genuinely amazed. Felix had told her that their paths had crossed but twice before and yet the young man, who undoubtedly had more people to remember than he could possibly manage, had instantly recognized him. She had always imagined that a man of such status and title would be one who barely took in the details of those around him unless they were of some importance to him.

“And these are your family, Mr Allencourt?” the Duke said and looked towards Jeremy, Fleur, and Georgina.

“Yes, this is my son, Jeremy,” Felix said and paused so that the two men might greet each other with a courteous bow. “And this is my daughter, Fleur.”

“Good afternoon, Miss Allencourt. How very nice to make your acquaintance,” the Duke said and bowed.

“Good afternoon, Your Grace,” Fleur said, and it was clear that she was very nervous indeed.

“And this is the daughter of my cousin,” Felix said turning his attention upon Georgina. “Miss Georgina Jeffries.”

“Good afternoon, Miss Jeffries,” the Duke said and stared at her for a moment in a way which almost made her cheeks flush. “How very nice to meet you,” he went on after a brief pause.

“And how very nice to meet you too, Your Grace.” And, as Georgina graciously inclined her head, she had the strangest sensation that the two of them had met before.

Chapter 4

To anybody else present, the Duke of Calder's garden party would certainly have appeared to be a resounding success. And it had been, Emerson knew that much.

And yet it had shaken him to the core of his being and had had an effect on him that he could never have expected.

By the time he had greeted his twentieth group of guests, Emerson had begun to find a certain rhythm to it all. The first few were a little awkward, that much was true, but he knew that he had a certain amount of natural charm, the untaught and unpolished variety that he had always had, and the more he began to relax into his own personality, the easier each greeting became.

Even those who had come agog with curiosity to see the elusive Duke, the young man who had barely been at home most of his life, had begun to seem amusing to him rather than unsettling.

And then Felix Allencourt had introduced the daughter of his cousin, Miss Georgina Jeffries. And the moment he heard her name, the *very* moment he heard her name, all his new-found ease seemed to evaporate. Emerson had felt as if he had slipped through a crack in time and was falling helplessly, his arms flailing wildly as he tried to

retain his composure.

She gave no real indication that she had recognized him at all, barring a momentary narrowing of her gaze that was so brief he still was not entirely sure that he had seen it at all. And her conversation had been such that the initial sense of panic soon left him, even if the feeling of being greatly unsettled did not. And hours later as he stared at the firelight dancing on the crystal of the whisky decanter, that feeling seemed to oscillate. One moment he felt the relief that he was certain she did not know him and the next, all he could do was imagine the ramifications if the realization of who he really was ever dawned on her.

His sudden shock had loosened his tongue, and he had begun to chatter to Georgina Jeffries as if it would somehow prove to her that she could not possibly know him.

“Tell me, Miss Jeffries, are you staying with Mr Allencourt and his family?”

“Yes, I arrived a little over a fortnight ago, Your Grace.”

“And where is home to you ordinarily, Miss Jeffries?” As he continued to talk, he was aware of Felix Allencourt’s daughter, Fleur, studying him closely.

No doubt the young lady thought that he had taken an instant liking to her visiting cousin, and why would she not? After all, Georgina Jeffries had grown into a most beautiful young woman.

“I live on the edge of a little town called Horley in Hertfordshire, Your Grace.”

“And how do you like Devonshire, Miss Jeffries?” Emerson had felt his mouth go dry, yet he seemed unable to stop talking.

He knew he ought really to be paying equal attention to the rest of her family, but his sense of panic had created an urgency within him to convince the young lady that he was a stranger to her, an interested stranger who had no idea where she came from.

“I like it very much indeed, Your Grace. And to be staying in a beautiful place which is so close to the sea is a great treat for me. There are rivers and lakes aplenty in Hertfordshire, but I think there is nothing to compare to the sight and sound of waves rolling in.”

“I am in complete agreement, Miss Jeffries, but I am biased.” He laughed and was pleased to see that she smiled warmly without any hint of suspicion. “But I am sure that Hertfordshire is a fine county indeed.”

“Indeed, it is, Your Grace.”

“And how long will you be staying in this part of the world, Miss Jeffries?”

“It is rather open-ended, Your Grace.”

“Yes, Miss Jeffries is here taking the wonderful Devonshire air so that she might recover from an illness she suffered lately,” Felix Allencourt added helpfully.

“Oh dear, I hope you are recovering well?”

“Very well indeed, thank you. In truth, I am very much back to my old self, although my dear cousins are very attentive nonetheless.”

“I am sure that they are very glad to have you here,” he said and finally found himself able to turn away and include Fleur and Jeremy Allencourt in the conversation.

“I am very pleased to have her here, Your Grace,” Fleur said warmly, and he thought it likely that she was a nice young woman indeed.

“As am I, Your Grace.” Jeremy Allencourt, a man of his own age who was handsome and fair, smiled amiably. “It is always better to have two women in the house chastising you than simply one.”

“Indeed, I am sure that is true.” For a moment, Emerson had found himself able to relax and laugh with the pleasing young man.

He was grateful to him for easing the tension for a moment and providing him with some respite, a tiny slice of time in which to order his thoughts a little better and be certain to keep his countenance in check.

Emerson had been grateful to see his butler hovering a few feet away as the group of people gathered to be greeted by the Duke of Calder had greatly increased. He realized that he had been speaking to the Allencourt party for some time, perhaps devoting a little too much attention to them as compared with everybody else in attendance.

“Well, you must enjoy your afternoon and the fine weather we seem to be blessed with today,” Emerson said in a sort of polite dismissal that he was not at all comfortable with.

He had never really been comfortable with much of what went along with being such a titled man, and it did not seem at all right to behave that way with Georgina Jeffries. It felt so false.

The rest of his greetings seemed to drift by in a haze of indistinct chatter, as all the while Emerson let his attention stray this way and that just to see where she was.

It was almost as if he could not quite believe he had seen her, not to mention the fact that she had appeared not to recognize him. Every time he looked, he fully expected her to be looking back at him, her face full of recollection of the boy who had once lived in her house.

Emerson sighed and poured himself another large whisky, settling back into the heavy armchair that he had drawn up to the fire. He looked and felt dishevelled, with his tailcoat thrown carelessly over the back of the chair and his blue waistcoat hanging open. He had untied the necktie of his shirt and let it hang loosely down over the top of his unbuttoned waistcoat.

He ran his hand through his thick hair and could feel that it had given up its attempt at neat ash-brown order and had returned to its ordinarily unruly state.

Emerson took a hearty gulp of the whisky and knew that he had already taken too much; his head would be thick and cloudy the next day, and he would regret taking on so much alcohol. But that concern was for tomorrow.

As the alcohol began to take the edge off his concerns, Emerson realized that there was another reason why he had spent the rest of the garden party with one eye on Georgina Jeffries. In all his one and twenty years, Emerson Lockhart knew that Georgina Jeffries had indeed been his only real friend.

It was true that he had not seen her for more than a decade, but her kindness and care when they were children was something that he had never forgotten, despite his best efforts to adhere to his father's advice of retraining his mind to believe in a different past altogether.

Georgina or *Georgie* as he had called her back then, was the only person he had ever missed when he had been taken away that night by Garrett Winstanley; ripped out of one world and neatly inserted into another.

He had been but eleven years old the last time he had seen her, and she just nine. But she had been a clever, quick-witted little girl, one with a big heart and the courage to use it wisely. She had defied the awful old woman, the one he had a recollection was her grandmother, to befriend the boy who was nothing more than a servant in her house.

But he also remembered that Georgie, like him, seemed always to be alone. They were the only children in that great house, and they were of an age to make natural friends.

It seemed to him that so much had happened since then, so many changes had occurred in his young life, that he could hardly remember much of what had gone before. And when he added in his father's version of events, the things he must practice until he believed

them himself, it all became much more confusing.

But Emerson was sure he could remember Georgie finding herself in trouble on more than one occasion for spending too much time with the boy who helped out in the stables, cleaned the boots and shoes, and took on whatever little tasks the housekeeper set him to.

And he remembered how it felt every time Georgie returned to him, even when he thought that her grandmother had chastised her so much that she never would. It always filled him with hope somehow, the idea that there might be more people out in the world just like Georgie. People who did not judge or only select their friends from a very narrow group of people.

But what he could not remember was quite how he got to that place in Hertfordshire initially. He knew with certainty that he had been a servant in Georgie's home, and when she had said she had lived on the edge of the small town of Horley, the memory of that name had flooded back with such force he had been absolutely certain that he could only be talking to his old childhood friend.

Emerson wondered if there had been another life before he had arrived at that house in Hertfordshire. And how was it that he had come to be there when his own father had been born and always lived in Devonshire? If only the old Duke had explained that to him when he had asked. After all, it was little enough information for a man to

have about his own origins.

Draining the remaining whisky in the glass and determining not to have any more, Emerson wondered if his own mother had been from Hertfordshire. But whether she was or was not, it could not explain why he had ended up as a servant in the house of people he was sure he did not know or have any connection to.

And yet he remembered being there from a very young age, he was sure. Emerson let out a great sigh and knew that he would have to revisit such memories when his head was much clearer. These were things which had been lashed down beneath a haze of half-truths and outright lies; things which had not been thought of fully for several years.

It would take some work, Emerson knew, but he would have to go back to that time in his head and search for old truths which now might make sense.

And as for Georgie, he really did not know what to do. Although she seemed to be as clever as always, but now with the poise and grace of a grown woman, Emerson realized that he did not really know her anymore. If she *did* find out who he was, what might she do with that information? Would she make it known to all, or would she still be a friend to him and defy the expectations of those around her?

He determined that he would find out more about Georgie; he would gently try to discover if she was still the same person underneath her adult exterior. And he would start with the musical evening at the assembly rooms.

That was the only further piece of information Emerson had gathered after leaving the Allencourt party to make their way into the gardens. When they had bid farewell to their host and had begun to depart for their own carriage at the end of the afternoon, Emerson had overheard Fleur Allencourt telling her cousin that she dearly hoped she would be well enough to attend the assembly rooms when the string quartet was playing.

Emerson rose to his feet and slumped out of the drawing room, slowly heading for the stairs in a less than straight line. Now that he was upright, his head was spinning, and he knew that he would have a most uncomfortable night followed by a most unhealthy morning.

But soon he would be back to his old self and able to think things through properly and decide how best to truly proceed.

Want to read the rest of the story? [Check out the book on Amazon!](#)

Also, please turn the page to find a special gift from me!

Sign up for my mailing list to be notified of hot new releases and get
my latest **Full-Length Novel “Honorable Rosalind’s Heart”**
(available only to my subscribers) for FREE!

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://bridgetbarton.com/rosalind>

